

AFRICA@WAR 34:

# WAR OF INTERVENTION IN ANGOLA

VOLUME 2: ANGOLAN AND  
CUBAN FORCES AT WAR,  
1976-1983



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AFRICA  
@WAR SERIES



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## CONTENTS

Abbreviations	2
Addenda/Errata to <i>War of Interventions in Angola, Volume 1: Angolan And Cuban Forces At War, 1975-1976</i> (Africa@War Volume 31)	3
Introduction	3
1 Defenders of The Revolution	6
2 Lucha Contra Bandidos	17
3 Galo Negro	30
4 Trading Blows	37
5 Central Angola Burning	45
6 Mobile Warfare	53
7 Cangamba	57
Bibliography	68
Notes	68



Note: In order to simplify the use of this book, all names, locations and geographic designations are as provided in *The Times World Atlas*, or other traditional accepted major sources of reference, as of the time of described events. For example, the modern-day Republic of Namibia is usually cited as South West Africa because that designation of this territory remained in use in English language while it was under South African administration, from 1915 until 1990 – despite the decision of the United Nations General Assembly from 1968, which changed its designation into Namibia.



# ABBREVIATIONS

<b>ANC</b>	African National Congress (South Africa)	<b>IFV</b>	infantry fighting vehicle
<b>APC</b>	armoured personnel carrier	<b>LCB</b>	<i>Lucha contra Bandidos</i> (official Cuban term for COIN)
<b>ATGM</b>	anti-tank guided missile	<b>MANPAD</b>	man-portable air defence (system)
<b>BOSS</b>	Bureau for State Security (South Africa)	<b>MBT</b>	main battle tank
<b>BrI</b>	<i>Brigada de Infantaria</i> (infantry brigade, official FAPLA terminology)	<b>MGPA</b>	<i>Marinha de Guerra Popular de Angola</i> (The People's Navy of Angola)
<b>BrIL</b>	<i>Brigada de Infantaria Ligeira</i> (light infantry brigade, official FAPLA terminology)	<b>MGR</b>	<i>Marina de Guerra Revolucionaria</i> (Revolutionary Navy, Cuba)
<b>BrIM</b>	<i>Brigada da Infantaria Motorizada</i> (motorised infantry brigade, official FAPLA terminology)	<b>MiG</b>	<i>Mikoyan i Gurevich</i> (the design bureau led by Artyom Ivanovich Mikoyan and Mikhail Iosifovich Gurevich, also known as OKB-155 or MMZ' "Zenit")
<b>BrIN</b>	Special Forces Brigade (official FAPLA terminology)	<b>MINFAR</b>	<i>Ministerio de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias</i> (Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, Cuba)
<b>CAP</b>	combat air patrol	<b>MININT</b>	<i>Ministerio del Interior</i> (Ministry of Interior, Cuba)
<b>CAS</b>	close air support	<b>MMCA</b>	<i>Misión Militar de Cuba en Angola</i> (Cuban Military Mission in Angola)
<b>CIA</b>	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)	<b>MPLA</b>	<i>Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola</i> (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola)
<b>CIR</b>	<i>Centro de Instrução Revolucionária</i> (Revolutionary Training Centre, MPLA/FAPLA, Angola)	<b>NCO</b>	non-commissioned officer
<b>c/n</b>	construction number	<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>CO</b>	Commanding Officer	<b>ODP</b>	<i>Organização de Defeza Popular</i> (People's Defence Organisation; MPLA/FAPLA-controlled militia)
<b>COIN</b>	counter-insurgency	<b>PLAN</b>	People's Liberation Army of Namibia (SWAPO's armed wing)
<b>COMIRA</b>	<i>Conselho Militar para a Resistência de Angola</i> (Military Council of Angolan Resistance; faction of the FNLA)	<b>RLCBM</b>	<i>Regimiento de Lucha Contra Bandas Mercenarias</i> (Regiment for Combat against Mercenary Bands)
<b>DAA/FAR</b>	<i>Defensa Antiaérea y Fuerza Aérea Revolucionaria</i> (Revolutionary Air Defence and Air Force, Cuba)	<b>RPG</b>	rocket-propelled grenade (launcher)
<b>DEEM</b>	<i>Direcção de Estabelecimentos de Ensino Militares</i> (Military Education Establishment of the FAPLA)	<b>RIM</b>	motorised infantry regiment (official FAR terminology)
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo (Congo-Kinshasa, also Zaire)	<b>SAAF</b>	South African Air Force
<b>ELNA</b>	<i>Exército de Libertação Nacional de Angola</i> (Angola National Liberation Army), FNLA armed wing	<b>SADF</b>	South African Defence Forces
<b>FAC</b>	forward air controller	<b>SAR</b>	search and rescue
<b>FAC</b>	<i>Forças Armadas Cabindesas</i> (Cabinda Armed Forces)	<b>SDECE</b>	<i>Service de documentation Extérieure et de contre-espionnage</i> (External Documentation and Counter-Intelligence Service, France)
<b>FALA</b>	<i>Forças Armadas de Libertação de Angola</i> (Angola Liberation Armed Forces; armed wing of UNITA)	<b>SMMA</b>	Soviet Military Mission in Angola
<b>FAPA/DAA</b>	<i>Força Aérea Popular de Angola/Defesa Anti-Aviones</i> (Angola People's Air Force and Anti-Aircraft Defence)	<b>SWA</b>	South West Africa (nowadays Namibia)
<b>FAPLA</b>	<i>Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola</i> (People's Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola)	<b>SWAPO</b>	South West African People's Organisation (insurgency in the former South West Africa)
<b>FAR</b>	<i>Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias</i> (Revolutionary Armed Forces, of Cuba)	<b>TAAG</b>	<i>Transportes Aéreos Angolanos</i> (Angolan Air Transport, later TAAG, Angola Airlines)
<b>FAZ</b>	<i>Forces Armées Zaïroises</i> (Zairian Armed Forces)	<b>UNITA</b>	<i>União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola</i> (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola)
<b>FLEC</b>	<i>Frente para a Libertação do Enclave de Cabinda</i> (Front for the Liberation of the Enclave of Cabinda, Angola)	<b>Unimog</b>	<i>UNIversal-MOTor-Gerät</i> (range of multi-purpose, all-drive trucks manufactured by Daimler and sold under Mercedes Benz)
<b>FNLA</b>	<i>Frente Nacional de Libertação de Angola</i> (Angola National Liberation Front)	<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>FNLC</b>	<i>Front National pour la Libération du Congo</i> (National Front for the Liberation of the Congo)	<b>USSR</b>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (also 'Soviet Union')
<b>GT</b>	tactical group (primary COIN unit of FAPLA until 1978, but also a battalion-sized tactical group of every Cuban RIM in Angola)	<b>VDV</b>	<i>vozdushno-desantnye voyska</i> (Russian for airborne troops)
<b>GVS</b>	<i>glavnyi voennyi sovetnik</i> (Russian for 'Chief Military Advisor')		
<b>HQ</b>	headquarters		

# ADDENDA/ERRATA TO WAR OF INTERVENTION IN ANGOLA, VOLUME 1: ANGOLAN AND CUBAN FORCES AT WAR, 1975-1976 (AFRICA@WAR VOLUME 31)

Pages 14 and 15: The T-34/85 tanks, SU-100 self-propelled anti-tank guns, MiG-17 and MiG-21 jet fighters delivered to Cuba in the early 1960s were all Soviet produced. Indeed, and in similar fashion to what happened a few years previously in Egypt, Czechoslovakia acted as a ‘front’ – necessary to disguise a direct Soviet involvement. However, Czechoslovakia did deliver several consignments of weapons too, including large quantities of vz.52 rifles, as well as towed 30mm vz.53 anti-aircraft guns. In turn, the Cubans used the latter to build their own self-propelled anti-aircraft system by mounting them on modified BTR-60 chassis, as shown in the photograph at the bottom of page 15.

Page 59: In his recently published book, Carlos E. Pedre Pentón gave the following testimony of soldier Pedro Fernández, who took

part in the Battle of Bridge 14 while serving in a heavy mortar group – including an interesting assessment of Cuban combat losses:

That day all the 120mm mortars were lost with their trucks, eighteen total, almost all the 76mm cannons, two BM-21 [...]. Twenty-seven of us were believed missing. Considering a scenario of some Cuban soldier dying in a hospital or in transit to meet the troops, I guess that around thirty men died in that battle. The majority of casualties were from Havana. It was difficult to know in that war.”<sup>1</sup>

Page 71: The picture at the top of the page does not show a (Soviet-made) P-18 radar as mentioned in the caption, but an older design, the P-12.

## INTRODUCTION

There are dozens – if not hundreds – of publications about what is known as the ‘Border War’ in South Africa and the Western hemisphere. However, most of these accounts are related to the South African Defence Forces (SADF). While there is no doubt that the latter was an extremely innovative institution that succeeded both in adapting itself to counter-insurgency (COIN) warfare while developing a mobile warfare doctrine tailor-built for the African context, the actual war fought in Angola in the period 1975–1992 was not that of ‘South Africa against terrorists’ (of whatever sort): it was a major war involving the Angolan and Cuban armed forces, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, also ‘Soviet Union’), against diverse insurgent movements of Angolan origin, supported by multiple parties from abroad. Nevertheless, all of these have attracted far less attention than the SADF.

Indeed, even the operations of such South African, if not Western, ‘allies’ of Angolan origin as the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (*União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*, UNITA) would remain essentially unknown to the public if it wasn’t for the works of a handful of researchers, foremost Fred Bridgland. Certainly enough, at least some insights into the military aspects of the Cuban intervention in Angola have been published over the last 15 years: Edward George authored a thorough study in 2005, while Piero Gleijeses published two major works centred on the Cuban role in Angola based on original records and countless interviews with Angolan and Cuban leaders. However, it is only since the beginning of the 21st Century that Cuban veterans and historians – like José Ángel Gárciga Blanco or Jorge Martín Blandino – started publishing books about Cuban military experiences from Angola and thus additional, authentic details became available. Almost simultaneously, the Russian historian Vladimir Shubin collected and published testimonies of Soviet advisers related to their service in Angola and a study of the Soviet involvement. In the meantime, in Angola proper, local historians such as Miguel Junior also authored several monographs about their armed forces, based

on Angolan archives.

Sadly, most of these accounts are available in native languages only and therefore remain largely unknown in the English-language area. Precisely this was the first motive for preparing this volume, covering the phase of the II Angolan War between 1976 and 1983.

The reader should be forewarned that this volume is anything but an attempt to provide an all-encompassing overview of the conflict during these years – for multiple reasons. The first is that this is the second volume in a mini-series covering the II Angolan War, and it is to be followed by at least another volume dedicated solely to the Angolan and Cuban air forces. Correspondingly, air-power-related aspects are kept to a strict minimum – with the notable exception of the siege of Cangamba (because any narration of that battle would be pointless without a thorough examination of the role played by Angolan and Cuban aviation).

Second is that warfare is in essence an action and reaction game, and it is equally pointless to cover one side of a conflict without giving at least some insights into the “other side’s” actions and strategic intents – even more so because the latter are most of the time not well-understood by their opponents. Thus, major SADF operations had to be mentioned but are not covered in detail – simply because they are not the focus of this volume, while there is a wealth of books dedicated to these (including several volumes in the Africa@War series). For similar reasons, related political and diplomatic issues are not mentioned in detail: these are more than well-covered in a broad range of other publications, which is not the case of Angolan and Cuban military operations. Thus, the reader should be forewarned that this volume is not an attempt to provide an all-encompassing history of the conflict, but it concentrates on its military and operational aspects.

This project proved possible only because of the help provided by a number of individuals. In particular, I would like to thank my old friend Tom Cooper for the countless pieces of advice and insights provided through the years, but also Albert Grandolini,

from France, for sharing both his invaluable knowledge related to French intelligence services' involvement in Angola as well as many photographs from his extensive collection. José Matos, from Portugal, gave equally invaluable insights about the Angolan military, while war journalist Fausto Biloslavo, from Italy, kindly allowed the use of photos taken during his months-long travels in Angola in 1985. Last but not least, Martin Smisek, from the Czech Republic, provided unique details related to Czechoslovak connections with Angola.

This volume is dedicated to the memory of Italian journalist Almerigo Grilz, killed in Mozambique while reporting about the then on-going war there.

### Introduction

By the end of March 1976, the MPLA appeared firmly in control of Angola. The South Africans had completed their withdrawal while remnants of the armed wings of both the FNLA and UNITA were scattered. However, the conflict had devastated what used to be the richest Portuguese colony. Virtually hundreds of critical items of infrastructure had been destroyed and were in need of rebuilding. Worse yet: before independence, the around 300,000 Portuguese living in the country held most of the administrative and business positions, while roughly 90% of the 6.2 million Angola population was illiterate. Accordingly, the massive exodus of the Portuguese population during 1975 triggered a collapse of the state apparatus and threw the economy into utter chaos. To take only one example, only 50 qualified medical doctors remained in the country by the end of 1975. Furthermore, the MPLA elites were not the least enthusiastic about relying on what they defined as the 'petty bourgeoisie' – the qualified workforce trained by the Portuguese.

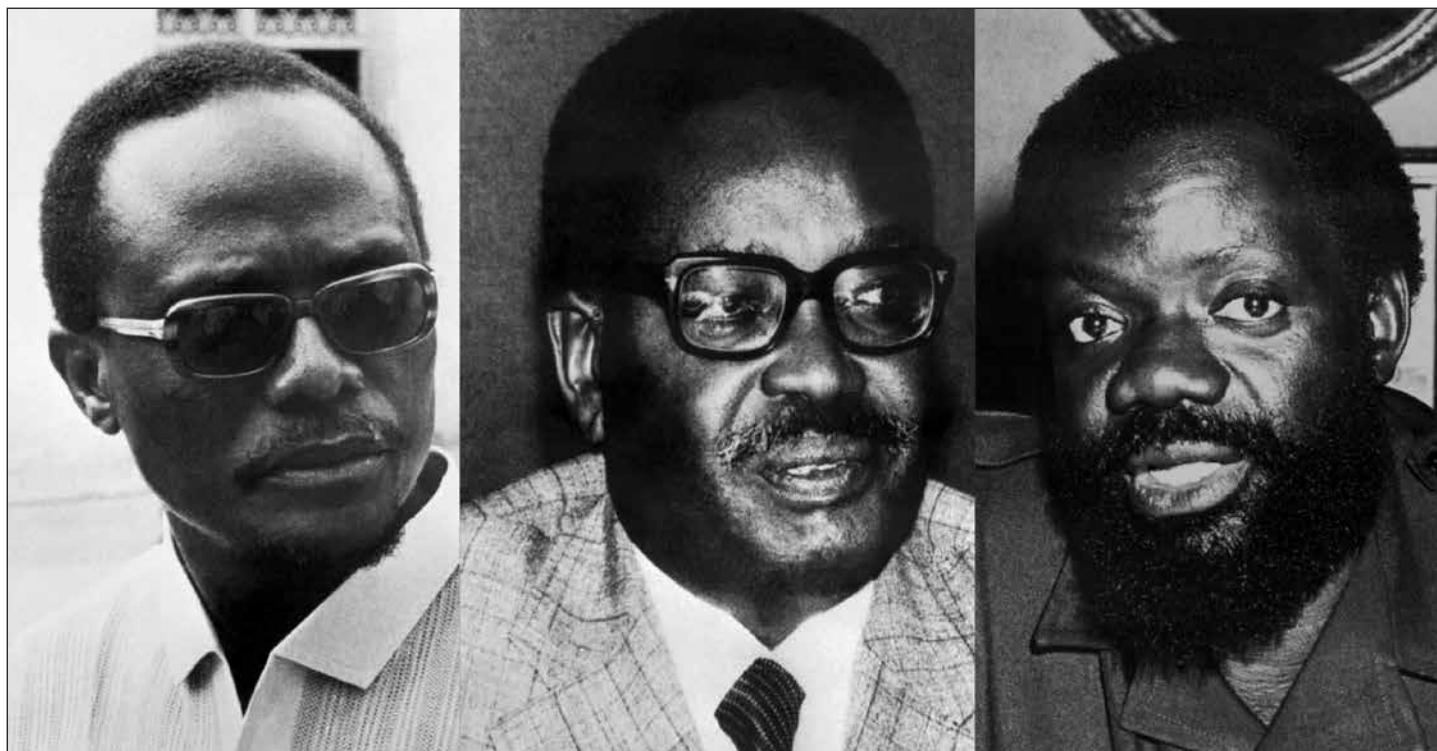
Most of the large export crop plantations were left unattended while commercial links between the cities and the rural areas were disorganised: before long, Angola was forced to import food even though the country was more than self-sufficient only a year before.

Both the fishing and sugar industries had come to a standstill. Diamond production collapsed from 2.4 million carats in 1974 to 352,793 carats in 1977. The only good news was that the oil industry in the Cabinda enclave had remained undisturbed. By the end of April 1976, the US Gulf Oil company had resumed its operations and thus guaranteed half a billion US\$ of income every year for the national government. Nevertheless, Angolan gross domestic product (GDP) decreased by 43% between 1973 and 1977.<sup>1</sup>

Correspondingly, the MPLA's task was daunting and a significant foreign input of qualified labour was essential during the time needed to train the necessary Angolan specialists. This proved complicated because the MPLA's military victory had come at a cost; although foremost nationalist and advocating a non-aligned political stance, its leadership remained dependant on military support from countries such as the Soviet Union and Cuba and could not afford to antagonize them by entering an all-out economic collaboration with Western capitalists. From Luanda's perspective, attracting investment from the latter would have also provide a useful deterrent against South Africa, as destabilizing Angola would threaten Western economic interests too. In the meantime, most of the latter – foremost the USA – were reluctant to deepen or establish economic ties with what they perceived as a Soviet satellite. Accordingly, it was Cuba again that played a crucial role through agreeing to send (at no cost) thousands of their own civilian workers. By the end of 1976, more than 1,000 of them were in the country: the figure tripled by November of the following year, and culminated at nearly 7,000 in 1978.<sup>2</sup>

### Economic blunders

Cuban support helped the MPLA government to initiate an ambitious welfare campaign. By December 1977, all the 16 provincial hospitals were up and running again and large vaccination campaigns initiated. Similarly, a nation-wide campaign was launched during the years following independence to increase the literacy



Widely mis-explained as an element of the 'Cold War' that 'turned hot', the II Angolan War, fought 1975-1992 was foremost a showdown between three major nationalist movements – all of which actually had similar ideologies, while being closely tied to three different ethnic groups – and their leaders, from left to right: Holden Roberto (FNLA), Augustino Neto (MPLA), and Jonas Savimbi (UNITA). (Albert Grandolini Collection)



rates among the population. Indeed, several MPLA leaders such as Augustino Neto or Lúcio Lara were widely acknowledged as ‘uncorrupted’ and ‘dedicated to the well-being of the people’. They nonetheless followed economic policies that proved overambitious in hindsight, and ultimately failed because of the resumption of the war that diverted ever increasing amounts of money at a time when there was a sharp decline in the prices of oil and other raw commodities on the international markets. Unwilling to borrow abroad and thus becoming vulnerable to the foreign pressure, the government opted for austerity policies instead.<sup>3</sup>

By early 1976, the MPLA movement officially announced its intention to build the national economy on a three tier basis – a state-owned sector, a cooperative sector, and a private sector. In practice, the state sector expanded massively for both practical and ideological reasons. From May 1976 on, a succession of plants and factories, around 1,500 large farms, and the whole banking system were nationalised. In the meantime, imports became a state monopoly. By May 1979, slightly over 70% of the production companies were state-owned. Initially, management committees with representatives of the workers and the government led these but the system proved chaotic. As a result, cadres appointed by the government replaced the committees. This measure also created immense problems simply because there were not enough people available with the adequate management skills. According to a report of the MPLA Political bureau;

The fall in production is largely the result of the poor organizational capacity of our companies and the shortage of qualified cadres, especially in management, as well as a fall in discipline at work and shortages of raw materials and other inputs.<sup>4</sup>

There were number of problems in the agricultural sector, too. Development of very large state-farms with the help of Soviet, East German and Bulgarian assistance proved counter-productive; buying the necessary tractors and infrastructure proved costly while it was difficult to hire rural workforce because people preferred to work on their own farms. In the meantime, attempts to encourage cooperative farms proved disappointing because the authorities failed to provide the peasants with the promised support.<sup>5</sup>

#### Vinte e sete

Fierce rivalry existed within the MPLA leadership. A faction led by Nito Alves, a former political commissar in the 1st Military Region, had grown increasingly dissatisfied with the movement’s policies,



Augustino Neto (centre, in suit) with Henrique ‘Ike’ Carreira (right), the first commander of the FAPLA and the first Minister of Defence of Angola (also one of the top Cuban protégées in Luanda) greeting Soviet advisors. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Lúcio Lara, closest associate of Augustino Neto, was as responsible for the MPLA’s overambitious planning for Angola’s post-independence development as the leader of the movement: while widely credited with sincere interest for the well-being of the population, he fell out of favour following Neto’s death and proved unable to prevent the entire movement from degenerating into an endemically corrupt group of oligarchs. (Mark Lepko Collection)

and accused it of favouring mixed, white or former *assimilados* – instead of the black Angolan population. Nito Alves also symbolized an ‘internal’ MPLA: in opposition to the leaders that were abroad until 1974, and was widely perceived as a fierce advocate of the Soviet model. Furthermore, he had been instrumental in organizing the *Poder Popular* in Luanda suburbs, and had wide-ranging support not only in the MPLA apparatus in the capital and the provinces, but also within the military. The resulting faction, dubbed the *Nitistas*, published several pamphlets contesting the movement’s policies

and in late 1976 this triggered the creation of an investigative commission tasked to root out the factionalists.

For both Nito Alves, and Jose Van Dúnem – the other faction leader – the writing was on the wall. In turn, they began plotting a coup using units of the People's Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola (*Forças Armadas Populares de Libertação de Angola*, FAPLA) that they controlled, and expected to receive support through mass demonstrations organized by their supporters.

However, their coup attempt of 27 May 1977 unravelled before long, although the plotters executed seven loyalist leaders. In turn, government unleashed a large-scale purge of the MPLA. Not only were 6 of out of the 16 Province Commissars dismissed, but the central government dissolved several provincial leading committees. Most of the ringleaders, including Alves and Van Dúnem, were arrested and executed during the following months – as were thousands of suspected *Nitistas*.<sup>6</sup>

Estimates about the number of people executed during the purge vary between 2,000 and as many as 50,000: in any case, the repression decimated the MPLA apparatus.<sup>7</sup> In turn, this process further impeded the movement's struggle to rebuild the country while time was running out – because UNITA was not wasting time: it quickly reasserted control of the population living in central and southern Angola. Last but not least, Agostinho Neto's death in Moscow on 10 September 1979 had a deep impact on the MPLA's leadership. His successor, Jose Dos Santos was chosen because he was no threat to the other major MPLA hierarchs. With Neto's death and the subsequent loss of influence of Lúcio Lara – his closest associate – there was nothing that could prevent the MPLA from entering a downward spiral, thus becoming more and more corrupt with time.<sup>8</sup>

**Table 1: List of Major City/Town/Locality Name Changes in Angola, 1960–Today**

Colonial Name	New Name
Amboim	Gabela
Benguella	Benguela
Carmona	Uige
Gago Coutinho	Lumbala N'guimbo
Henrique de Carvalho	Saurimo
Luso	Luená
Nova Lisboa	Huambo
Mocamedes	Namibe
Novo Redondo	Sumbe
N'Zeto	Ambrizete
Porto Amboim	Gunza
Pereira de Eça	Ongiva
Porto Alexandre	Tombwe/Tombua
Roçades	Xangongo
Vila Robert Williams	Caála
Sá de Bandeira	Lubango
Salazar	N'Dalatando
Santa Comba/Cela	Waku-Kungo
Santo Antonio de Zaire	Soyo
Sao Salvador	M'banza-Kongo
Serpa Pinto	Menongue
Silva Porto	Kuito
Teixeira da Silva	Bailundo/Bailunda
Teixeira de Sousa	Luau
Xamindele	Toto
Vila Luso	Luená
Vila Salazar	N'dalatando

# 1

## DEFENDERS OF THE REVOLUTION

The size of the task that was awaiting the Angolan High Command upon independence cannot be over-emphasised. The country urgently needed to build a strong national army, able both to deter the vastly superior South African Defence Forces (SADF) and to conduct large-scale COIN operations against internal foes. To make matters worse, this build-up had to take place in time of war, which continued unabated during the following decades. Indeed, the multiple difficulties faced by the country at independence proved extremely detrimental for its still nascent armed forces. Created in August 1974, the FAPLA consisted of a core of about 1,500 fighters experienced only in guerrilla operations. The civil war that went with the Portuguese withdrawal forced the MPLA to enlist virtually everybody willing to fight for the movement.<sup>1</sup>

As a result, the FAPLA had entered a period of extremely fast but virtually uncontrolled growth: by the second half of 1976 it

included 95,272 officers and other ranks. While these numbers allowed the government to maintain an armed presence in most of the country, the bulk of the force – the People's Army of Angola (*Exército Popular de Angola*, EPA) – consisted of little more than poorly trained militias.<sup>2</sup>

The fighters who had received officer training in countries such as Algeria, Cuba or the USSR during the war against the Portuguese were far too few in numbers to lead all the loosely organized squadrons and battalions created in 1975. As a result, 'auto-didact' officers without any formal training had to make do instead. To make up for the lack of necessary trained personnel, FAPLA massively enrolled former Portuguese army veterans – who thus often found themselves in an awkward situation: they were desperately needed for their skills, but strongly distrusted, as explained by Defense Minister Iko Carreira in May 1976:





The FAPLA experienced an immense and hasty growth during the second half of the 1970s, from effectively an umbrella organisation of multiple but scattered guerrilla groups, like this one from 1975, into one of – quantitatively – the biggest militaries on the African continent. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

There is a degree of elitism in FAPLA. Some comrades have an intellectual training or military skills from the colonial army which leads them to demand a level of organization and material support [...] we are not yet in a position to provide. Sometimes these same comrades demand positions of responsibility in the army which we feel should be awarded on political rather than technical competence. They don't always understand this.<sup>3</sup>

There were several exceptions. The 9th Motorized Infantry Brigade (9th BrIM) was a well-equipped and battle-hardened unit established in mid-1975, that remained by far the FAPLA's most powerful formation. Similarly, several of the infantry battalions trained by the Cuban Military Mission in Angola (*Misión Militar de Cuba en Angola*, MMCA) between October and November 1975 had also proven their combat effectiveness – especially when supported by their Cuban instructors. On the other hand, the logistical and other support functions barely existed. Vladimir Anatoliyevich Varganov, a Soviet advisor attached to the 5th Military Region made the following statements about the state of FAPLA troops as of October 1976;



A still from a video showing one of MMCA's instructors in the process of training a squad of the FAPLA. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Our task was not simple. There was a structure of sorts but there were no personnel – in the first instance, no officers. [...] These were difficulties with the rank and file as well: the majority were illiterate and couldn't speak Portuguese [...]. The adviser for artillery, Yuri Gubin, prepared an exercise. The result was a surprise – none of the Angolans could hit the target [...] The Angolans had been betrayed by their *guerrilla* style, where they'd shoot but not to aim, as long as there was a lot of noise. This is why operations to destroy the bases of UNITA often ended prematurely – and frequently without result – when the attackers ran out of ammunition and provisions.<sup>4</sup>

To make matters worse, the purges that followed the 27 May 1977 coup devastated the officer corps. The 9th BrIM was dissolved, while a number of cadres were demoted at best, or 'disappeared', as described by Vladimir Anatoliyevich Varganov, who was still in the 5th Military region at the time:

A number of individuals were arrested in our military district, including Santos (the political commissar whose adviser I had been), a member of the Central Committee and of the Revolutionary Council, the commander of the anti-aircraft



Group photograph of some of the Cuban advisors in Angola: they remained present in all major FAPLA headquarters throughout the 1980s. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

defence, and nine others whom we knew personally. Probably there were many others that we didn't know, including civilians. [...] From unofficial sources, we heard that many of them were executed on the edge of the Tunda-Vale ravine.<sup>5</sup>

### Re-structuring the FAPLA

Despite these difficulties, immense efforts were invested into rebuilding the army. The Defence Ministry was created on 12 November 1975 and this portfolio was held by Commander Henrique Teles 'Iko' Carreira until 1980 when Colonel Pedro Maria Tonha 'Pedalé' replaced him. The General Staff of the FAPLA was established around the same time: it exercised direct control over a number of support and logistical organs as well as a varying number of combat units, such as the 9th BrIM, which acted as a central reserve. However, it was the military regions (MRs) which continued to play the crucial role. These were not only controlling all the units and military infrastructures located in their areas of responsibility but were also in charge of commanding them during operations. The number of MRs increased from five in 1975 to

seven in 1983. By December 1985, another three MR, numbered 8, 9 and 10 had come into being, mostly by dividing the RM 1 area of responsibility.

By the end of 1976, FAPLA had dissolved its guerrilla-inherited structures such as the squadrons, and its Revolutionary Training Centres (*Centro de Instrução Revolucionária*, CIRs): instead, it planned to create 10 infantry brigades and 2 mechanized infantry brigades, and for each of its original five MRs then in existence to control either two or three such units, while one was to be kept in Luanda as strategic reserve. The purpose of the newly-established brigades was to deter and – if required – conduct conventional operations against a foreign regular army, such as those of Zaire or South Africa. The infantry brigades had three infantry battalions, an artillery group with at least one battery each of 76mm ZiS-3 guns and of 122mm D-30 howitzers, one tank company (seven tanks), and one reconnaissance company. The regular brigades operating within range of SAAF airstrikes received ever larger anti-aircraft elements, too.<sup>7</sup>

Simultaneously, the army created numerous specialized and independent units operating tube artillery, multiple rocket launcher systems (MRLS), reconnaissance, engineers, armour, and communication or logistical support companies, battalions or groups. These were attached to either the FAPLA General Staff or the respective MR headquarters. In turn, these units could reinforce infantry formations as necessary. Among these, a reinforced presidential security battalion with a tank company came into being in 1976.<sup>8</sup>

The Angolans also needed light infantry units specialized in counter-insurgency (COIN) warfare. Dozens of dedicated battalions thus came into being from 1976 on. These units were rather small with a nominal strength of 300 men during the first half of 1976. By the end of 1977, there were 57 of these. At the time, these battalions were attached to 13 Tactical Groups (GT), however, by mid-1978, experience had shown that the GT structure was not adequate to efficiently support protracted operations, noticeably because of their lack of organic support units. As a result, the GTs were discarded and the FAPLA counter-insurgency units were reorganized into Light Infantry Brigades (BrILs). In early 1980, each BrIL had a nominal strength of 1,260 officers and other ranks, organised as follows:



Two Cuban officers wearing camouflage fatigues chatting with two FAPLA guards. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

**Table 2: FAPLA Military Regions, late 1983<sup>6</sup>**

Military Region	Headquarters	Notes
MR 1	Uige	Uigé, Zaire, Lunda, Bengo, Malenje, and Cuenza North provinces
MR 2	Cabinda	Cabinda
MR 3	Luso	Moxico, Lunda North and Lunda South provinces
MR 4	Huambo	Humbo and Bié provinces
MR 5	Lubango	Cunene province
MR 6	Menongue	Cuando-Cubango province
MR 7		Benguela and Cuanza South provinces
MR 8		Cuanza North and Bengo provinces
MR 9		Malanje province
MR 10		Lunda North and Lunda South provinces



- HQ-element of 72 men;
- reconnaissance company of 35 men, equipped with 3-5 BRDM-2s, BTR-40s, BTR-152s, or Egyptian-made Wallid Qadr scout cars and APCs;
- rocket company with Grad-1P launchers;
- an anti-aircraft artillery [AAA] company with six 14.5mm ZPU-1 or ZPU-4 machine guns;
- an anti-tank platoon with five B-10 recoilless guns;
- three infantry battalions with 359 officers and other ranks each, each of them organized into three companies and including a mortar platoon with three 82mm mortars; Strela-2M (ASCC-code 'SA-7 Grail') section; machine-gun platoon, and
- 68 trucks necessary to provide mobility.<sup>9</sup>

The first of the BrILs was activated in July 1978 and was followed by an increasing number of similar formations. There were seven of these in 1980, 15 in 1981, 26 in 1983 and 43 in 1985. In 1982 the FAPLA established what was supposed to become a crack unit – the 44th Special Forces Brigade (BrIN). However, by July 1984 this was converted into another light infantry brigade.<sup>10</sup> Instead, during 1983, the 13th and 18th BrILs retrained as airborne brigades, while a third similar unit, the 244th, was established by 1985. Further development of special forces units became heavily dependent on cooperation with Portugal: this was established in the early 1980s and resulted in the emergence of several Portuguese-trained independent commando battalions between 1983 and 1985.<sup>11</sup>



A column of – rarely seen – BTR-40s of the reconnaissance company from an unknown BrIL, passing a checkpoint of the FAPLA. Notable is the second vehicle from the right, which received a camouflage pattern (for reconstruction of the same, see the colour section). (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A group of Cuban advisors atop one of FAPLA's T-34/85s. This was the primary 'main battle tank' of the FAPLA's regular brigades well into the 1980s. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



The '76mm divisional gun M1942 (ZiS-3)' was the primary artillery piece of the FAPLA's motorised and mechanised brigades as of the late 1970s and early 1980s: each had at least one battery of three guns attached. (Albert Grandolini Collection)





While the Angolan insurgents – especially those of UNITA – were bragging to foreign correspondents about meticulous preparations of their operations, including creation of ‘sand boxes’ to brief their officers and other ranks, the same practice had already been introduced by Cuban advisors. This Cuban is seen while advising several colleagues and their troops of the FAPLA. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

**Table 3: Official FAPLA Terminology**

Original Designation	Short	Translation
Brigada de desembarque e assalto	BrDA	Airborne Brigade
Brigada de Infantaria	Brl	Infantry Brigade
Brigada da Infantaria Legeria	BrIL	Light Infantry Brigade
Brigada da Infantaria Motorizada	BrIM	Motorized Infantry Brigade
(Unknown)	BrIN	Special Forces Brigade

**Table 4: FAPLA Brigades in 1980**

Military Region	Brigades
MR 1	3rd and 5th Infantry, 31st and 70th Light Infantry
MR 2	8th and 10th Infantry
MR 3	13th, 21st Infantry and 32nd Light Infantry
MR 4	18th Infantry, 36th, 39th, 45th, 48th and 53rd Light Infantry
MR 5	1st and 2nd Motorized Infantry, 11th, 16th, 19th Infantry, and 54th and 67th Light Infantry

Another organ, the People’s Defence Organisation (ODP) appeared on 15 September 1976. These part-time and locally recruited militias received basic military and political training. They initially formed platoons and companies to protect critical infrastructure as well as their own villages or towns. Later on, ODP even included battalions. Furthermore, by the mid-1980s, FAPLA had begun to organise territorial battalions for the same purpose with citizens who had already completed their national military service.<sup>12</sup>

To provide the necessary manpower to its ever growing armed

forces, the MPLA resorted to mandatory military service starting in late 1976. A number of boot-camps came into being to provide basic training to the conscripts. The activation of schools to train non-commissioned officers (NCOs), officers and specialists was crucial. With the time, the FAPLA’s Direction of Military Education Establishments (*Direcção de Estabelecimentos de Ensino Militares*, DEEM) controlled a vast network of dedicated facilities. These included the NCO-School ‘*Comandante Benedito*’, the Officers-School ‘*Comandante Arguelles*’ (responsible for training platoon-leaders), the Inter-arms Officer School ‘*Comandante Nicolau Gomes Spencer*’ (established on 8 July 1976, and a school providing two-year long courses), and the

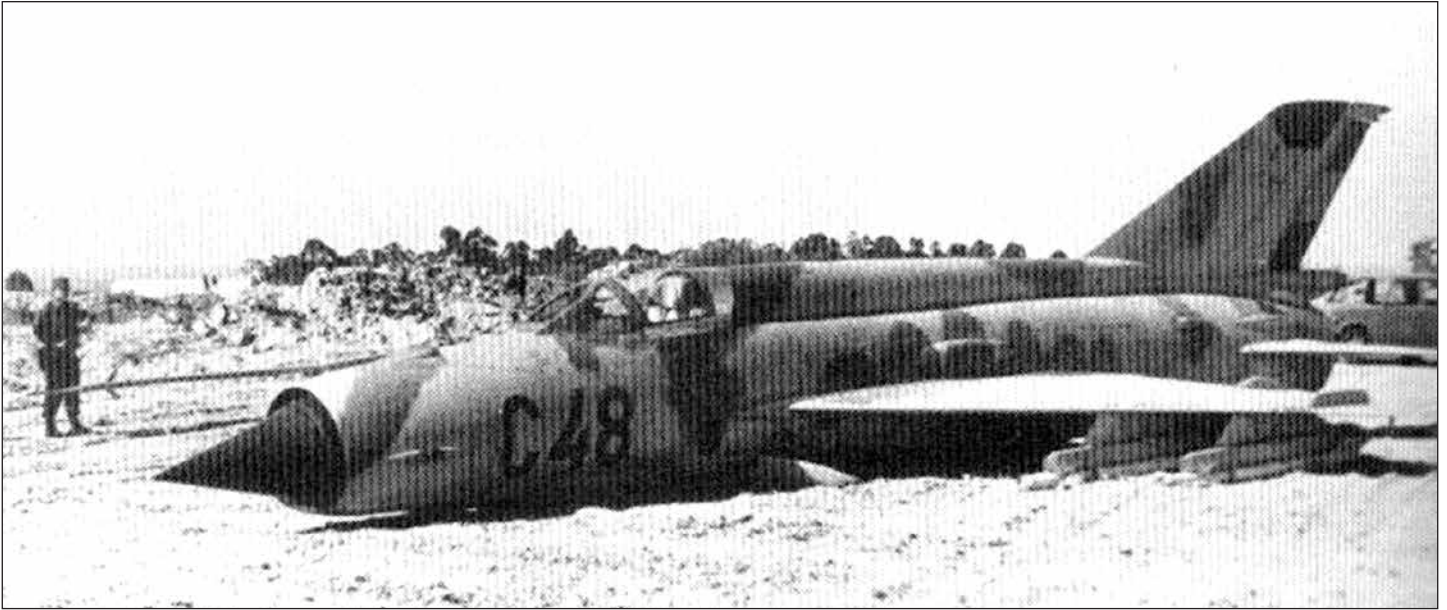
Political-Officers-School ‘*Comandante Gika*’ (established on 23 June 1976, and offering a two-year curriculum).<sup>13</sup>

#### FAPA/DAA and MGPA

As described in Volume 1, the Angolan People’s Air Force (*Força Aérea Popular de Angola*, FAPA) was formally established on 21 January 1976. Initially, it included one squadron each of MiG-17, MiG-21, one of Mil Mi-8 and Aerospatiale SE.316B Alouette III helicopters, and one operating a miscellany of transport aircraft. The service was almost entirely manned by Cuban personnel seconded from the Cuban Revolutionary Air and Defence Force (*Defensa Anti-Aérea Y Fuerza Aérea Revolucionaria*, DAAAFAR). Accordingly, the new air arm recruited virtually every Angolan with previous experience or technical knowledge related to aviation, mainly from airlines or flying clubs. There were not many of them: even as of the second half of 1976, only 320 native Angolans served with the FAPA. Nevertheless, by then, basic training of new pilots had already begun in the country with small civilian aircraft and two Soviet-delivered Antonov An-2 biplane transports. Most importantly, the first batch of Angolan cadets to be trained in Cuba left the country in late December 1975; the second group left for the USSR in April 1976, and was expected to be trained on Antonov An-26 transport aircraft. Later in 1976, the third group of cadets was selected to be trained as pilots and specialists in the USSR.<sup>14</sup>

With time, FAPA created its own training facilities, including the Light Aviation School ‘*Comandante Veneno*’ in Lobito and the Military Aviation School ‘*Comandante Bula Matadi*’ in Negage. The first of these provided both helicopter and light aircraft training, while the second was dedicated to helicopter training only. By 1979, an anti-aircraft branch was active and integrated into the FAPA, which was thus re-designated as the Angolan’s People’s Air Force and Air Defence Force (*Força Aérea Popular de Angola/Defesa Aérea e Antiaérea*, FAPA/DAA).<sup>15</sup>

Because of the ever-increasing need of air power, the service expended quickly and by the mid-1980s, it included three regiments



This was one of 12 MiG-21MF delivered to the FAPA/DAA in early 1976: the type was almost exclusively flown by Cuban pilots until at least 1983. The aircraft suffered a non-combat-related mishap during the same year, but was recovered and repaired. Notable is the underwing armament consisting of four R-3S air-to-air missiles. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

that controlled several squadrons each. Nevertheless, thorough the 1980s the FAPA/DAA remained a bi-national force, as entire squadrons continued to be totally Cuban-manned, especially so in the case of high-end combat aircraft units which required highly-qualified fighter-jet pilots. In a sense, the DAAFAR contingent in Angola was thus embedded into FAPA/DAA's order of battle. Indeed, it must be emphasised that the FAPA had only marginal combat capabilities during the first half of the 1980s: its first Angolan-staffed fighter squadron became operational in 1981, but it would take years of additional training to turn it into a combat-effective unit.<sup>16</sup>

The People's Navy of Angola (*Marinha de Guerra Popular de Angola*, MGPA) was officially inaugurated on 10 July 1976. It was formed around a small core of MPLA militants who had received naval training in the Soviet Union in 1969 and 1970, while other sailors underwent training provided by Cuban instructors, starting in March 1976. Initially, the MGPA included around 400 men and was equipped with 12 patrol boats of the Argos, Belatrix and Jupiter classes, as well as several landing ships and speedboats, all inherited from the Portuguese. This tiny navy was reorganized thereafter into two naval brigades with two divisions each: two out of the four resulting divisions were equipped with landing boats and the two others with patrol boats. The service also began to receive Soviet-built ships, but lacked any significant combat capability until September 1982, when the first two out of a total of six Project 205U missile boats (ASCC-code 'Osa') were inducted. By 1988, the MGPA had grown to 2,700 men and 19 vessels, including four Project 206 torpedo boats, the six missile boats, three Polnochny-class landing ships and two Project 1258 minesweepers.<sup>17</sup>

### Godfathers

The swift FAPLA build up would not have been feasible without a staggering influx of both material support and expertise. By the virtue of its origins, the MMCA's purpose was only to train the nascent FAPLA. Afterwards, the latter continued to devote important resources to train or advise local forces, beginning with the FAPLA High Command, while allowing number of Angolan officers and specialists to be trained in Cuba directly. However, the Soviets played a crucial role too. Indeed, Moscow was providing the weapons, ammunition and other equipment necessary to equip

both the Angolan forces and the Cuban expeditionary corps in the country. Between 1978 and 1988, the Soviet Union delivered – among others – 700 tanks, at least 1,200 Armoured Personal Carriers (APCs) and Infantry Fighting Vehicles (IFVs), 164 combat aircraft and 156 helicopters. The bulk of the ground equipment were second-rate with the most modern tank delivered being the T-62, and this only in the end of the conflict. On the other hand, a number of aircraft and anti-aircraft systems were much more advanced, such as the Igla-1M MANPADS or the MiG-23ML interceptors.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, other socialist countries delivered weapons too, but in much lesser quantities. Noticeably, the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic – an early supporter of the MPLA during the struggle for independence – donated 10,000 vz.24 and vz.26 sub-machineguns with 10 million rounds of ammunition in 1978 to arm the ODP. Other shipments of light weapons and ammunition continued to be given free of charge during the subsequent years, including 6,350 infantry weapons (6,000 vz.24 and vz.26 sub-machineguns, 100 vz.52/57 rifles, 50 vz.37 heavy machine guns, 200 vz.26 light machineguns), 1,000 RPG-75 anti-tank rocket-propelled grenade launchers and 30,000 PP-Mi-Šr anti-personnel mines in 1982. An advantageous Czechoslovak loan also allowed the Angolans to order 15,000 vz.58 assault rifles and 500 vz.61 submachine guns, among other equipment. In January 1984, the Presidium of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia approved free of charge delivery of another batch of military materiel comprising, among other items, 3,000 vz.52 pistols, 9,000 vz.26 sub-machineguns, 300 vz.26 light machineguns, 504 RPG-75s and spare parts for MiG-17s. The Czechoslovak communist leadership hoped that such an attitude could secure future arms contracts that would be financed from the extraction of Angolan mineral wealth. However, such plans never materialised – war torn Angola was not able to pay properly even for already provided credits for arms and civilian goods. This was the reason that the relations between the two countries cooled off considerably in the latter part of the 1980s.<sup>19</sup>

A first team of 40 Soviet military advisers arrived in Luanda on 16 November 1975, giving birth to the Soviet Military Mission in Angola (SMMA). This was the beginning of a massive involvement. Numbers of Soviet advisers had risen to more than 500 by 1980 and to 2,000 by 1985. By the end of 1990, 10,985 Soviet military



personnel, including 7,308 officers, had served in Angola. In the meantime, thousands of Angolans were trained in the Soviet Union directly.<sup>20</sup> The first head of the Soviet mission was Major General Ilya Ponomarenko from 1976 to 1978 and was succeeded by Lieutenant General Vassily Shakhnovich from 1978 to 1980, and then Lieutenant General Georgy Petrovsky until May 1982. The next *glavnyi voennyi sovetnik* (Chief Military Adviser; GVS) was General Konstantin Kurochkin, former Deputy Commander of the Soviet Air Landing Troops (*Vozdushno-desantnye Voyska*, VDV), and he was to have an extremely important role during the following years.<sup>21</sup>

With such a large presence of Cuban and Soviet instructors in country, with time both missions defined their respective areas of responsibility in terms of training, although both missions' leadership were directly advising the FAPLA General Staff or the Presidency, advocating on occasion very different strategies, thus invariably placing the Angolans between a rock and a hard place. In the end, the Soviets often had the last word, as their support was crucial for both Angolan and Cubans, and they thus held a *primus inter pares* position.

While the Cubans initially provided all the instructors for the 'Comandante Nicolau Gomes Spencer' Inter-Arms Officer School, the Soviets took over the formation of higher-ranking officers from the rank of Colonel upwards, and took charge of the instruction of the political commissars. Furthermore, the MGPA was exclusively trained by the Soviets. The FAPA leadership was a Soviet prerogative, but tactical units could be advised by both Soviet and Cuban advisers. Moreover, all the Angolan fighter pilots were trained in the Soviet Union. Initially, most of the advisors embedded within FAPLA combat units were Cubans, while Soviet specialists served only in positions for which no Cuban staff were available. In 1977,

the Soviet mission became solely responsible for training FAPLA conventional brigades, while Cubans were in charge of training and advising COIN units. From that year on, FAPLA infantry and motorized infantry brigades thus had only Soviet advisers, while it was the opposite for the light-infantry Brigades. Similarly, the MMCA provided training for the ODP.<sup>22</sup>

### Fatal flaw

The large, divided and often under-qualified FAPLA officer corps inherited from the 1975-1976 build-up proved an insoluble problem, as their widespread corruption and disregard of the well-being of their own troops almost immediately plagued the nascent army. By May 1976, MMCA officers in Cabinda were reporting a general lack of interest for planning and organizational duties, as well as a marked reluctance to engage in COIN operations among the Angolan officers. Several battalion leaders simply did not stay with their troops and visited them on only rare occasions – with a devastating effect on their units' morale. Endemic logistical problems made things even more serious and resulted in the Cubans having to directly feed around 25,000 FAPLA soldiers. Indeed, even the incorporation of numerous and much better-trained officers during the subsequent years failed to palliate these deficiencies.<sup>23</sup> In a 1978 report, Defence Minister Iko Carreira stated that there was:

Little demand from the chiefs toward their subordinates and insufficient accuracy shown by the military in the fulfilment of its military duty [...] Amongst the regular troops there are manifestations of anarchy, voluntarism, insubordination and desertion. [...] Insufficient operating of the logistic components in ensuring and supplying the troops with all corresponding material means, became one of the main causes that stifled the



Good soldiers, led by poor officers: a group of FAPLA troops with their Cuban advisors during a graduation ceremony in 1982. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



planned construction of the regular armed forces and the increase of their combative readiness.<sup>24</sup>

By 1982, the general picture had not changed. According to another assessment, this time from the Political Bureau MPLA, which emphasised the inability of the military justice to enforce discipline:

Some factors have contributed to the difficulties that we have experienced in dealing with the enemy. [...] the low stringency and pugnacity of some military leaders, some divergences in the application of the single command, and the low demand in fulfilment of orders has created some problems with [...] the effectiveness of our Armed Forces. [...] there are still difficulties in supplying our troops, especially on the fronts that, in addition to the lack of rotation for fighters stationed in operational areas, has caused demoralisation and defections.<sup>25</sup>

The same year, General Konstantin Kurochkin reported to President Dos Santos that some officers were selling food rations allocated to their soldiers for their own benefits. Even worse, on at least one occasion several SA-7 MANPADS ‘disappeared’ from the inventories of a training camp to be sold on the black market. Unsurprisingly, their Soviet instructors bitterly complained about the behaviour of FAPLA’s officers, as written by the contemporary GVS:

An Angolan soldier is a good soldier. As for the officers, they need special attention. I am getting the impression that an abyss separates officers and soldiers. The higher an officer’s post is, the deeper the abyss. When an officer reaches the level of a battalion or brigade commander and higher, he begins to consider soldiers a lower race.<sup>26</sup>

A direct result of these flaws was that a number of FAPLA units were chronically understrength and it was extremely difficult to provide replacements for combat casualties. During the same meeting, the Soviet GVS reported that the 2nd Motorized Infantry Brigade had only 55% of its nominal strength, with only between 20 and 30 men per infantry company. At the same time, the 3rd Infantry Brigade infantry companies had as few as 10 to 12 men on average.<sup>27</sup>

However, and despite all of these difficulties, a number of FAPLA units gained experience and confidence and proved themselves against not only UNITA but also the SADF, maintaining their cohesiveness even in the face of devastating losses. Furthermore, there were a number of examples when FAPLA officers proved themselves excellent and aggressive leaders in combat.

### The MMCA

As of mid-March 1976, the Revolutionary Armed Forces (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias*, FAR) of Cuba had roughly 36,000 men deployed in Angola. These forces were organized in three divisions and seven other regiments, equipped with 300 armoured vehicles.<sup>28</sup> Following the South African withdrawal at the end of March 1976, and aside of the training provided to the Angolan military, the MMCA had two main purposes; the first was to deter any new Zairian or South African invasion by garrisoning conventional forces in Angola; and the second was to conduct the ‘fight against bandits’ (*Lucha Contra Bandidos*, LCB, the Cuban term for COIN) – and that in conjunction with FAPLA, in order to finish off the

FNLA, FLEC and UNITA bands still active in the country. For the latter mission it established a dedicated unit, the Regiment for Combat against Mercenary Bands (*Regimiento de Lucha Contra Bandas Mercenarias*, RLCBM). This was deployed in Angola in March 1976 and established its HQ in Huambo.

The Cubans were initially willing to leave a large-sized expeditionary corps in Angola as long as necessary, although they expected FAPLA to be ready to take over in a few years. However, the Soviets were not eager to support such a massive Cuban deployment, as its presence was counterproductive with regards to their ongoing diplomatic efforts to reduce tensions with the West. Thus, Havana had no choice but to prepare for a much swifter withdrawal than initially intended. Indeed, in early April 1976 the Cubans began to withdraw their troops, even if taking care to do so very gradually in order to hide its size from foreign intelligence services. Nonetheless, in May 1976 the Cubans planned to have only six combat regiments left in Angola by 1977 and three in 1978, while by 1979, the MMCA was intended to include advisors only.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, as of April 1977, only around 15,000 FAR troops were still present in Angola.<sup>30</sup>

**Table 5: MMCA Combat Units, 1977<sup>34</sup>**

Unit	HQ
RLCBM	Huambo
RIM Centro	
RIM Luanda	
RIM Sur	Moçâmedes
RIM Este	Saurimo
RIM Norte	Negage
RIM Cabinda	

**Table 6: MMCA’s Commanding Officers**

Period	Rank & Name
December 1975 – December 1977	General de Division Abelardo Colomé Ibarra ‘Furry’
December 1977 – 1979	General de División Raúl Menéndez Tommasевич
1979 – 1981	General de División Pedro García Peláez

By 1977, there were at least seven regiments stationed in Angola. The RLCBM’s HQ was still in Huambo; while at least six other motorized infantry regiments (RIMs) – the RIMs Centre, Luanda, North, South, East and Cabinda – were also present. The RIMs were each nominally organized into one armoured battalion with 20 to 25 tanks, three motorized infantry battalions, one artillery group and other support units with between 2,000 to 2,500 men. They were, in the Angolan context, powerful units similar to the FAPLA BrIMs. In practice, the Cuban RIMs were organized into several battalion-sized tactical groups (GT) combining motorized infantry, tanks, anti-aircraft artillery and artillery detachments. Although some of these units did provide detachments to support FAPLA COIN operations, their main mission was to face a conventional attack from either Zaire or South Africa.<sup>31</sup>

However, the withdrawal process stopped altogether after the 1977 Katangese Tigers’ offensive in the Zairian Shaba province.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it was not only the latter’s second offensive the following year, but especially the SADF’s attack on Cassinga that enticed the



Despite differences with regards to politics and strategy for the war against 'bandits' in south-eastern Angola, and a partial withdrawal of the FAR from the country in 1978, generally, Angolan and Cuban militaries maintained tight cooperation. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A T-54 or T-55 MBT next to a North Korean-made K-61 light tracked amphibious vehicle: both were operated by several RIM in Angola in the mid-1970s, together with a company of PT-76 amphibious tanks. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Cubans to reinforce their expeditionary force again, and reshuffle their dispositions in southern Angola.<sup>33</sup>

#### The SWAPO factor

The South Western African People Organisation (SWAPO) was created on 19 April 1960 and its main objective was the independence of South West Africa.<sup>36</sup> While remaining nationalist, with time its ideology increasingly turned to Marxist-Leninism, and the party became organized along the Leninist pattern of 'democratic centralism'; an authoritarian structure where the top leadership – foremost it's President Sam Nujomah – reigned supreme. The movement opted to launch an armed struggle to reach its ultimate goal as early as 1962, and obtained its first weapons from Algeria the following year. By 1964, small numbers of militants were receiving military training in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, the People's Republic of China and Tanzania. In 1965, the first of these, organised in small groups of 10 fighters, began to infiltrate South West Africa from Zambia, intending to create small bases and recruit support among the

local populations, until the South Africans heard of these activities. On 26 August 1966, police officers raided a training camp, killed two militants and captured another eight.

This was the first clash of a decades-long conflict. While SWAPO's dedicated armed wing, the People's Liberation Army of Namibia



## MMCA Saving Neto

The MMCA played a crucial role in foiling the Alves' putsch of May 1977. Apparently, the coup plotters expected the Cubans to remain neutral and unleashed their enterprise while the RIM normally stationed near Luanda was – because of tensions resulting from the first foray of the Katangese into that country (so-called Shaba I) – re-deployed to the border with Zaire. As a result, the Nitistas' main military leader, Jacob Caetano João 'Monstro Immortal', chief of Staff FAPLA, concluded that they were in a position of military superiority in the capital because they could rely on strong support in the 9th BrIM, which had several subunits garrisoned in the Grafanil camps in the suburbs on Luanda. These included the brigade's reconnaissance and engineer companies as well as two artillery groups. At dawn of 27 May 1977, elements from these units sallied out of their camp to invest the São Paulo prison, where they freed around 150 prisoners. The next target was the National Radio, which was seized at 0700 hrs. Soon after, the putschists went on the air to announce the removal of the government and requested their sympathizers to rally and manifest in front of the Presidential Palace.

While the putschists also captured several high-ranking

dignitaries, they failed to catch the President, who fled to the Ministry of Defence building, where he contacted the Cubans for support. The MMCA HQ reacted decisively. Virtually all the small detachments presents in the capital and its surroundings were mobilized.

In a matter of hours, these reinforced the Presidential Guard and its Cuban instructors and retook the National Radio. An infantry company supported by four PT-76s and a pair of BTR-152s also took control of the Grafanil camp. Meanwhile, infantry companies and several PT-76s from the RIMs South and East were carried to Luanda IAP by An-12 and An-26 aircraft. The swiftness of the counter-coup operations left the putschists wrong-footed and the only serious resistance came from the 9th BrIM elements that guarded the National Radio – until these capitulated when the Cuban deployed four T-34 tanks around the building. By early afternoon, the coup attempt had been defeated and the putschists leaders escaped – after having ordered the execution of seven loyalist high-ranking dignitaries captured in the morning – but were in turn captured thereafter and executed. Strikingly, it was Cuban MININT operatives who hunted down and captured Nito Alves.<sup>35</sup>



A poster in Luanda showing the machete and cogwheel of the MPLA against the backdrop of the Angolan flag, joined alongside the hammer and sickle and the Soviet red flag; all under the yellow star of Angola and combined with depictions of Augustino Neto and Vladimir Ilich Lenin. The actual state of the unity with regards to intentions and purposes between communist governments of Havana, Luanda and Moscow was exposed during the coup attempt in May 1977, when Cuban favourites in the Angolan capital lost much of their influence. (Photo by Al J Venter)

(PLAN) increased the pace of its infiltrations from Zambia during the following years, these remained limited in essence, although the South Africans took the threat seriously enough. The SADF was engaged in Angola to help the Portuguese forces seal SWAPO's infiltration routes from Zambia toward South West Africa across Angolan territory. Later on, preventing SWAPO to settle in Angola was one the main reasons behind the launch of Operation *Savannah*. This was crucial because SWAPO's main base of support was Ovamboland and this area could be reached only from Angola while Ovambo communities were present in south-western Angola. From that time onward, SWAPO became a crucial factor in the Angolan

conflict because its sheer presence dictated most of the SADF strategy.<sup>37</sup> The takeover of Angola by the MPLA was decisive for SWAPO's fortunes. The movement relocated its headquarters from Lusaka in Zambia to Luanda, and it was authorized to operate at will from the Angolan territory. This was of tremendous importance for SWAPO, as emphasised by Sam Nujomah;

It was also a complete break with our own more recent history. Now we had an open frontier – 800 km long – to the north. Our geographical isolation was over. It was as if a locked door had suddenly swung open [...]. For us the new phase meant that,





A SWAPO camp in central Angola in the early 1980s. (Adrien Fontanellaz Collection)

given a harmonious relationship [...] with the new government of an independent Angola, we could at last make direct attacks across our northern frontier and send in our men and weapons on a large scale.<sup>38</sup>

SWAPO had remained a relatively small organization until then but started to develop new structures to make the most of the new, much more favourable situation, as well as to integrate the new Namibian recruits who began rallying the movement in their thousands from 1975 on. The transition was however plagued with difficulties. A number of these new recruits were well educated and became disenchanted by the leadership's authoritarianism, especially as the latter was also not immune from corruption either. As a result, mutinies erupted in early 1976 in at least one of the movement's camps in Zambia. Unsurprisingly, the reaction was ruthless; about one thousand men were virtually imprisoned in their own camp for months, while at least 'several dozens' were executed.<sup>39</sup>

#### Rise of the PLAN<sup>40</sup>

In 1976, PLAN relocated its HQ to Lubango and by 1977 the armed wing had restructured itself, evolving into a much more sophisticated apparatus. The supreme SWAPO military organ became the Military Council, chaired by Sam Nujoma, the movement's leader. The council met once in a year and was responsible for defining the armed wing strategy and general organization. The PLAN's military commander remained Dimo Hamaambo. Four major territorial commands, named Fronts from 1979 on, also came into being. These were the North-Eastern, Northern, North-Western and Eastern Fronts, corresponding roughly to the Namibian's Kavango, Ovambo, Kaokoland regions and Caprivi Strip respectively. In 1978, the new Operational Command Headquarters (OCHQ) was activated specifically to control all PLAN operations and units.

By the end of 1976, the PLAN had also established a string of small bases along the south-western part of the South West African border and assisted FAPLA into clearing these areas of UNITA – even though SWAPO used to be allied with UNITA until the Portuguese left. The PLAN's main activities remained the infiltration of guerrilla forces into South West Africa and these increased to the point where the South Africans reported 500 incidents there in 1978.

That year, the PLAN created its Special Unit, dedicated to conduct infiltrations into South West Africa. Later renamed Typhoon, and ultimately Volcano, it included more than 1,000 combatants. In practice, the insurgents seldom operated in more than platoon strength during their infiltrations, and their actions were limited to mine-laying, small-scale ambushes, destruction of infrastructure and the assassination of Namibians cooperating with the South Africans. The SADF and police forces adapted swiftly and turned into a deadly COIN-machinery: as a result, the PLAN suffered extremely heavy casualties during its raids.

A major training facility, the Tobias Hainyeko Military Training Centre was established near Lubangao in early 1977 with the help of sixteen Soviet advisers under Colonel Yuri Zaputryaev. Soon enough, the facility was up and running, providing PLAN recruits with three months of basic training with an emphasis on small-scale guerrilla tactics, as well as specialized courses for cadres. In the meantime, hundreds of militants went abroad to receive anti-aircraft artillery and artillery training. Indeed, PLAN fielded an ever-increasing number of anti-aircraft units, usually equipped with 14.5mm and 23mm anti-aircraft guns and Strela-2M MANPADS to counter the frequent and often deadly SAAF air strikes targeting its bases in Angola.<sup>41</sup>

**Table 7: PLAN's Major Units**

Unit Designation	Year of Establishment	Notes
Special Unit	1978-1979	regular unit, later known as Typhoon and Volcano
Alpha Battalion		semi-regular unit
Bravo Battalion		semi-regular unit
Moscow Battalion		semi-regular unit
8th Battalion		semi-regular unit
10th Battalion		semi-regular unit
1st Mechanized Infantry Brigade	1978	
2nd Mechanized Infantry Brigade	1980	

Since the end of Operation Savannah and until the first months of 1978, the South African security forces were authorized only to conduct small-scale actions near the Namibian border, the so-called "Shallow area".<sup>42</sup> and this had considerably eased the PLAN build-up. Thus, the insurgents were taken completely by surprise when the SADF raided their large Cassinga camp, located 200 kilometres from the border, on 4 May 1978 and suffered massive losses – including several high-ranking cadres – as a result. Noticeably,

three Military Council members died that day; Jonas Haiduwa, the PLAN deputy commander, Wilbard Tashiya-Nakada, the North-Western Front commander and David Mbango, the North-Western Front Political Commissar.

Thereafter, and while PLAN continued to organize and train guerrilla forces, it progressively created conventional forces that were necessary to take on UNITA, as requested by the Angola government.<sup>43</sup>

Correspondingly, several units – the Alpha, Bravo, Moscow, 8th and 10th Battalions – progressively came into being. By early 1982, these five battalions, classified as “semi-regular” by PLAN, were ready and deployed in the Cunene Province to take on UNITA and thus ease the operation of the infiltration parties intending to cross into South West Africa.

SWAPO HQ also decided to raise full infantry brigades. This was necessary because SWAPO leadership had concluded that it required such units to increase the movement’s political stance, but also hoped to launch conventional attacks into South West Africa. The Soviet support proved instrumental for this project. The number of Soviet advisors in the Tobias Hainyeko Military Training Centre increased to between 40 and 50, and these established a second – six-month long – training course for the regular infantrymen. The first four months were for individual training and the last two months for unit training. Furthermore, another facility, the Jumbo Training Centre, opened in 1978 to train the necessary specialists in the use of heavy weapons. Indeed, by the early 1980s PLAN began to receive not only various artillery pieces – such as ZiS-3 guns and BM-21 MLRS, BRDM-2s, BTR-152 and BTR-60 APCs, but also a



A SWAPO-operated – and carefully camouflaged – truck ‘near the border of South West Africa’, in the early 1980s. The presence of the movement and its military wing, the PLAN, was in turn used by South Africa as an excuse for repeated ‘externals’ – de-facto large-scale raids – ever deeper into Angola. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

dozen T-34 and T-55 tanks.<sup>44</sup> In this fashion, the PLAN created its 1st Mechanized Infantry Brigade in 1978. By the end of 1983, this unit included three infantry battalions, numbered from 1 to 3, as well as an artillery battalion controlling several batteries with ZiS-3 76mm guns, ZPU-1, ZPU-4 and ZSU-23 anti-aircraft guns and Strela-2M MANPADS. In 1980, another similar formation, the 2nd Mechanized Infantry Brigade, came into being.<sup>45</sup> In 1980 already, the latter unit was conducting COIN operations against UNITA in the North of the Bié Province, while in 1983, the 1st Mechanized Infantry Brigade was also engaged in combat operations against Savimbi’s forces.

Hence, by the early eighties, SWAPO/PLAN had become a significant military player in the Angolan civil war too, especially so as PLAN soldiers were widely acknowledged as excellent fighters by both the Cubans and the Soviets. Indeed, General Konstantin Kurochkin made the following statement regarding one of the PLAN brigades; ‘If the FAPLA would have five such brigades, the south of the country could have been protected.’<sup>46</sup>

## 2

## LUCHA CONTRA BANDIDOS

It took only a few months for Cabinda’s State Liberation Front (*Frente para a Libertação do Estado de Cabinda*, FLEC) to recover from its defeat of early November 1975, when the small FAPLA and MMCA contingents defending the enclave crushed the combined invasion of the FLEC and the FAZ. By April 1976, the insurgents, still supported by Zaire, had resumed cross-border hit and run attacks, mostly laying small-scale ambushes and through mining roads. Operating in small groups, the guerrillas benefited from the presence of the very dense jungle covering most of the enclave’s territory and that allowed them to establish small bases, virtually undetectable from the air, to support their raids. FLEC also

successfully targeted the Cubans: while the latter did not suffer any fatalities during the November battles, at least 40 FAR troops had died and several dozen others were wounded in the enclave by the end of May 1976. In early May, Ramón Espinosa Martín, the Cuban CO for Cabinda, was grievously injured when a landmine destroyed the BTR-60 in which he was travelling with a group of other officers: one of them, Commandant Arides Estévez, subsequently died of his injuries.

The deteriorating situation triggered a massive reaction, as, because of the presence of oil companies, the enclave was the financial heart of the Angolan economy. By 6 May 1976, MR 1’s





Cuban troops atop a T-34/85 deployed in support of one of the motorized infantry regiments (RIMs) of the Cuban Military Mission in Angola (MMCA) assigned to the Cabinda enclave in 1976. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

most battle-hardened FAPLA units, 1 Bon I and 2 Bon I, were airlifted from Negage AB to Cabinda airport. Meanwhile, the DAAFAR contingent in Angola had already taken over the latter airport and prepared it for operations by MiG-17F fighter-bombers. Furthermore, four Mil Mi-8 helicopters out of the first batch delivered by the Soviets were sent to Cabinda as soon as they had been assembled, on 17 May 1976.

This was only the beginning. The second Cuban RIM was positioned in the enclave during May to act as a reserve if an intervention in Congo-Brazzaville was needed.<sup>1</sup> While the RIMs did not normally take part in LCB operations, Cuban advisors were embedded in virtually all the FAPLA units in the enclave – down to company or even platoon level, if necessary. Indeed, the order of battle of FAPLA's MR 2 increased dramatically. A few months later, it included two brigades that controlled five battalions each – three combat ready, one under training, and one acting as a depot. Despite the notoriously tense relations between the FAPLA command in Cabinda and its MMCA counterpart, this influx of troops proved enough to force the FLEC – chronically plagued by internal divisions – to decrease the pace and the scale of its operations. The insurgents were then hit by at least four large sweeps, named Operations '*Second Anniversary of FAPLA*', '*Two Bridges*', '*Mingas*' and '*Violência*', run by the FAR and FAPLA units in the enclave in 1976. The movement survived and remained a real nuisance – if only because it tied down large number of troops badly needed elsewhere – although no mortal threat.<sup>2</sup>

### Operation Primero de Mayo

Unsurprisingly, the offensive of January-February 1976 had not eliminated the FNLA's presence in northern Angola. To the contrary, large numbers of ELNA fighters had simply withdrawn away from main towns – and the roads linking them – to regroup. Furthermore, hundreds of ELNA combatants were still garrisoned in the FNLA's rear bases in Zaire. As large parts of the CIA weapons shipments delivered in 1975 and early 1976 were still available, the FNLA had everything it needed to initiate a protracted insurgency. Meanwhile, by mid-March 1976, after their reoccupation of the

region, FAPLA and ODP had garrisoned all the localities under their control with small detachments, while MR 1 controlled another 11 FAPLA infantry battalions, as well as a Cuban one. The MMCA then constituted the RIM North, with HQ in Negage, to protect the area against any outright Zairian invasion.

The ELNA became active again and launched its first large attack against the village of Massau, 250 kilometres northeast of Negage. They easily overwhelmed the small FAPLA garrison defending the place and executed all the prisoners. In turn, mixed columns of Cubans and Angolans were sent toward the village, and swiftly retook it. Indeed, the main obstacles for such advances in the area

remained the poor state of the local road network. The Massau attack had made clear that the ELNA still had large concentrations of troops in Angola and accordingly, a large number of FAPLA and FAR reconnaissance parties were sent to investigate the areas bordering with Zaire during April 1976. Meanwhile, both the 1st Military Region and MMCA HQs concluded that a large-scale operation was needed to flush the insurgents out of the northern border areas with Zaire and logistical preparations were made accordingly, notably by prepositioning forward fuel depots for the helicopters. However, these came too late to pre-empt a new large-scale ELNA attack, this time at the village of Mangando, another isolated place located near the Zairian border. Operating near their Zairian rear-bases, the ELNA troops easily overran the position before vacating it. By doing so, they lured a small FAPLA detachment sent to rescue the garrison: the latter in turn suffered casualties when they began to retrieve the bobby-trapped bodies of their comrades.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, a new wave of reconnaissance teams and spies were sent in the area located between Milando and Massau to locate the enemy positions. Helicopters and MiG-17s flew several reconnaissance missions in the same area to confirm the intelligence provided by the reconnaissance units on the ground. In that fashion, several ELNA concentrations were detected near Forte República, Quinguengue and Mangando. In the meantime, all available FAPLA combat units also progressively moved closer to the border although the Cuban HQ took great care to make these look like routine operations. Indeed, the operational area was not only immense with a length of 250 kilometres and a depth of between 150 and 190 kilometres, but also almost entirely covered by dense jungle. There were few tracks – generally in a sorry condition – and this made it easy for the enemy to detect any axis of advance. For these reasons, the FAPLA-FAR command opted for a multi-pronged operation, with several thrusts that were to converge on the ELNA concentrations, thus preventing it from concentrating its forces. The two primary thrusts were to follow the Cuale-Massango-Forte República and the Brito-Godins-Marimba-Mangando axis. The first of these two was the most crucial and correspondingly, was entrusted to the





This Vickers Viscount of the Zaire Aero Service (registration 9Q-CPY) was one of many light transports operated on behalf of the CIA to haul arms and supplies for the FNLA/ELNA in the late 1970s. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Curiously, while supported by the CIA and thus the USA, the FNLA also continued receiving support from the People's Republic of China. This group of Chinese advisors was photographed in one of ELNA's camps in Zaire in 1975. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

single FAR battalion that was acting as the military region reserve. The battalion, under First Lieutenant Gamaliar Estévez Crespo, was also reinforced with artillery and an engineer detachment equipped with bulldozers. Furthermore, there were no fewer than five other secondary axis of advance along virtually all the existing tracks, while a last column was to progress cross-country to confuse the enemy even more.<sup>4</sup>

### MiGs over Massango

Considering geographical constraints, it is hardly surprising that nearly half of the aircraft available in Angola were mobilised to support the offensive. Several helicopters and a quartet of MiG-17Fs were concentrated at Negage AB. On 13 May 1976, they were reinforced by four MiG-21MFs and two An-26s. The six aircraft refuelled before taking part in airstrikes planned for that day, thus opening the offensive. The raids targeted simultaneously the villages of Massango and Mangando, and a smaller twin-engined aircraft that – acting as a forward air controller (FAC) – guided the fighters.<sup>5</sup>

At 1100 hrs, the first four MiG-21MF reached Massango entered into a dive and each dropped two 500kg bombs over their targets before making a second strafing run, emptying their magazines. A few minutes later, the MiG-17Fs appeared and dropped two 250kg bombs each over the same area despite the fire of at least one AAA-

battery sited on the high-ground neighbouring the locality. Thus, in less than 15 minutes, the eight MiGs had dropped four tons of bombs and fired 800 23mm rounds. Meanwhile, the two Antonovs had also dropped their load of 250kg bombs over Mangando. On the morning of 15 May, another four-ship of MiG-17Fs again hit the latter place and strafed a group of ELNA soldiers. *Fuerte República* was also bombed by the MiG-21MFs, but one of the jets was damaged by ground fire, although its pilot managed to land safely in Negage. The air raids had the intended effect, and the badly shaken ELNA troops defending the two places retreated into Zaire instead of opposing the columns that had begun to advance on 13 May. Despite this, the columns took two weeks to reach their objectives, even though only the FAR battalion met with determined resistance from a well-entrenched ELNA position – which it overcame the usual way; the forward artillery observer (FAO) called for a massive artillery strike until the latter dislodged the ELNA fighters from their entrenchments. Thus, *Primero de Mayo* ended by the end of the month with FAPLA and Cuban troops reaching the Zairian border. Furthermore, the enemy fighters left behind large amounts of weapons and ammunition. While most of the ELNA troops escaped to Zaire unscathed, and thus free to fight another day, one of the main purposes of the operation was to re-establish control over the roads crossing the area – and hence, its major localities. Without controlling their populations, it would be much more difficult for the insurgents to infiltrate deep into Angola from their Zairian sanctuaries.<sup>6</sup>

However, the FNLA could still rely on a large number of fighters and continued to launch cross-border operations – sometimes even establishing small bases on Angolan territory (especially in the Malanje area). Their activities were small-scale in nature and mostly consisted of mining roads and tracks, or hit-and-run attacks with groups including between 20 and 70 fighters against government-controlled villages, farms and small FAPLA or ODP garrisons. Correspondingly, at least three other large COIN operations, named *Graduação*, *Café* and *Impacável* took place in MR 1's area of responsibility in 1976. Nonetheless, the movement remained very much active and its fighters could be deadly. On 17 May 1978, the insurgents shot down a Mi-8 helicopter with small-arms fire, killing six Cubans, including the pilot, Lieutenant Emilio González Rivas.<sup>7</sup> As a result, MR 1's HQ mobilized no fewer than two FAR and seven



A MiG-17F of the FAPA/DAA in a bank while flying around Luanda IAP. Four fighter-bombers of this type were deployed for operations against remnants of the ELNA in northern Angola, in early and mid-1976. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A FAPLA soldier with a load of RPG-rounds as seen in the Caxito area in early 1976. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

FAPLA battalions as well as nearly 1,000 ODP militia, and launched Operation *Response* (*Resposta*) on 24 May. These troops destroyed several ELNA bases on Angolan territory until 16 June, when the operation was concluded.<sup>8</sup>

### Tigers to the Rescue

It was the Angolans that landed the killing blow against the FNLA, and then by using their very trump card – and this against the ‘better advice’ of the Cubans: in mid-1976, Nathanaël Mbumba, the leader of the Congo National Liberation Front (*Front de Libération National du Congo*, FLNC, former ‘Katangese Gendarmes’), requested the Cubans to provide his movement with new and heavier weapons. Havana declined: Castro was not the least interested in getting involved in supporting another of FLNC’s adventures into Zaire and thus escalate tensions in the region. For the same reason, he and his aides constantly advised Luanda to keep the movement on a short leash – and, apparently, the MPLA couldn’t agree more.

This is why – irrespective of what is claimed by multiple well-positioned Western sources to this day – the FLNC’s short-lived invasion of Katanga in southern Zaire in March 1977, took the Cubans completely by surprise. Indeed, when asked why he didn’t inform them about the FLNC attack, Augustino Neto argued –



Two of ELNA’s combatants with BM-21 rockets that failed to explode: the BM-21 proved one of the most effective weapons in the hands of the FAR and FAPLA units during the prosecution of the ELNA/FLNA in northern Angola. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

rather unconvincingly – that the Angolans were not aware of the Tiger’s plan either. In practise, Luanda had run out of patience with Zaire and decided to retaliate against it for the support it provided to FLNA, UNITA and FLEC. As result, the Angolans not only ceased to restrain the FLNC from settling its old score with the Mobutu regime but also increased their support to Mbumba. Hence, the FLNC – already consisting of about 2,000 battle-hardened veterans – had no problem with arming and training the thousands of Zairians who rallied to its ranks during and after its March 1977 foray, and preparing itself for a much larger operation. Also known as ‘Shabba II’ or ‘II Shabba War’, this was launched in March 1978, and became best-known in the West because of the events at Kolwezi. Certainly enough, the Tigers were eventually defeated in a counteroffensive run by the Zairian, French, Belgian and Moroccan troops, and forced to withdraw to Angola.<sup>9</sup> However, they not only inflicted several defeats upon the Zairian military, but also enticed President Mobutu Sesse Seko to conclude a deal with his Angolan counterpart during a meeting in July of the same year: henceforth, Luanda was to prevent the FLNC from invading again; in return, Kinshasa was to stop its support for Angolan insurgents. Contrary to earlier times, Mobutu kept his word – at least for the time being.<sup>10</sup>

However, and once again, Luanda kept the Cubans out of this affair: indeed, while their intelligence did detect some of the FLNC’s preparations for Shabba II, the Angolans denied knowing anything and guaranteed that they would oppose such an operation.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, the Mobutu-Neto agreement proved to be the beginning of the end for the FNLA. Even though its armed branch was estimated to include between 7,000 to 10,000 poorly trained and armed fighters, the movement had no means to support these on its own. Furthermore, its leadership soon divided into factions and by 1979, its historical leader, Roberto Holden went into exile in



France. One of the factions attempted to revive the armed struggle and created the Military Council of Angolan Resistance (*Conselho Militar para a Resistência de Angola*, COMIRA) but, without any significant result. Even when Holden Roberto returned to Zaire to revive his defunct movement, in 1983, he failed: by then the MPLA played its political card well and made openings to the Bakongo population, offering a general amnesty to all the FNLA/ELNA members, in 1978. This measure proved highly successful: by 1984, the last 1,500 ELNA/COMIRA combatants had returned to Angola and surrendered.<sup>12</sup>

### Savimbi's Long March

The February–March 1976 combined Angolan–Cuban offensive (see Volume 1) inflicted a massive blow upon UNITA and its armed wing, FALA: all of their battalions, carefully trained by the South Africans, were badly mauled. However, the bulk of UNITA consisted of poorly-trained guerrillas who had enrolled into the movement during the previous year and most of these simply scattered. Some remained in – sometimes very large – groups hidden in the countryside, while others simply returned to their villages. Thus, UNITA/FALA was still very much in existence, even though completely disorganized.

Moreover, government forces and their Cuban allies could hardly make the most of UNITA's state of disarray. Indeed, by early June, the RLCBM was the only Cuban dedicated COIN unit active in southern Angola, and its three battalions were supported by a mere three battalions of the FAPLA. These six units were all that was available to hunt FALA bands in all of the provinces of Huambo, Bié and Cuando Cubango – about 300,000 square kilometres. The FAPLA then rushed in additional new battalions as soon as they had completed training, but the available manpower remained far below that what was necessary to conduct a successful protracted COIN campaign. The Cubans knew better from their own experience: during the 1960s in their own country, they had concentrated as many as 80,000 troops on an area of 3,000 square kilometres to deal with the insurgents operating in the Escambray Mountains. Even though they underestimated UNITA's resilience, they nonetheless assessed that at least 28 COIN battalions would be required to finish off the insurgency in these three provinces. Furthermore, the Cuban–Angolan militaries had to concentrate their meagre means on hunting down Jonas Savimbi and could thus not avoid giving a breathing space to other UNITA/FALA bands.<sup>13</sup>

Threatened by advancing Cuban forces from Luena and under repeated MiG-21MF airstrikes, the UNITA president had no choice but to evacuate its Gago Coutinho (Lumbala) refuge on 14 March 1976, together with 4,000 fighters and civilians, thus closing the conventional phase of the war, and beginning a 2,000 kilometre-long trek. During the latter, Savimbi's column joined with other FALA contingents on several occasions, before creating new columns that were ordered to move to various areas in southern and central Angola – to organize new bases and revive guerrilla operations. The UNITA president and around 1,000 followers continued their march towards Cueilei – around 150km from Huambo – where another 800-strong contingent under Major Katali was located.

However, intending to kill or capture Savimbi, the FAR and FAPLA were in hot pursuit, and, indeed, the former had several narrow escapes. Airpower proved decisive in this regard. On 7 April 1976, Cuban intelligence had triangulated UNITA radio traffic originating from Tempué, and deduced that Savimbi's HQ was located there inside the former Portuguese army barracks. Two MiG-21MFs and four MiG-17Fs took off from Menongue: led by

Pilot 1st Class Jaime Archer Silva, the pair of MiG-21s approached the target area at 700km/hour, entered a 5 degree shallow dive and unleashed their 57mm S-5 unguided rockets on the barracks. In the meantime, the four MiG-17Fs, led by Felipe González, directly strafed other targets in the vicinity, as they could not carry rockets or bombs and have sufficient range to reach Tempué. Altogether, the six MiGs fired 128 rockets, 880 23mm and 147 37mm shells. Aside from damaging the barracks, they also set afire a fuel depot. The same day, other MiG-21MFs struck the localities of Cangombe and Muie, suspected of harbouring insurgents groups. On 8 April, another six-ship formation struck a jetty on the Cuito Cuanavale river, near the town of Vila Nova de Armada, which was used by the guerrillas. Again, the four MiG-17Fs conducted only strafing runs with their 37mm and 23mm guns, while the MiG-21MFs dropped four OFAB and FAB-250M-62 250kg bombs, their pilots noticing feeble and ineffective AAA fire. In the morning of 21 May 1976, a FAPLA patrol detected a large insurgent column in the area of Samasseca, where Cuban signals intelligence (SIGINT) had also detected heavy radio traffic. If Savimbi's presence in Tempué on 7 April remained unknown, he was in Samasseca on 21 May, but escaped from the An-26s and MiG attacks that followed.<sup>14</sup>

Between 21 June and 13 July 1976, the MMCA and FAPLA made a large sweep in the Tempué-Chipoia region, named Operation *Surprise*. For Savimbi, the next close call followed in the vicinity of Chissimba: FAPLA patrols skirmished with the columns again and, soon thereafter, helicopters flew reconnaissance attempting to locate the insurgents. One of the Mi-8s was shot at by the guerrillas (who reported it as shot down, and to have recovered the bodies of the crew), and as a result, other helicopters soon dropped light infantry teams to block the insurgent escape routes. Savimbi split his force into three smaller columns to confuse their pursuers and made good his escape with 350 men. Even then, he only narrowly escaped: on 28 August he arrived in Cueilei accompanied by only 76 remaining men.<sup>15</sup>

On 14 July 1976, the FAPLA launched another LCB operation in the Cuando Cubango province, named Operation X, which lasted two weeks. Thereafter, concluding that the insurgents had been disrupted, the Cubans reduced their involvement while FAPLA ran only a few smaller-scale operations. Thus, UNITA/FALA found at least some breathing space to reorganize itself. A communication network linking the scattered groups was re-established: initially, Savimbi ordered its guerrillas to avoid engaging enemy forces and concentrating on disrupting the food supply of government-held localities. Correspondingly, peasants living near the latter were moved deeper into the bush by the guerrillas.

By the end of the year, the insurgents were back to launching attacks against small garrisons. On 13 December 1976, around 300 fighters under Major José Kanjundo assaulted Ringoma and claimed to have killed 51 enemy troops, as well as 30 civilians, for the loss of two guerrillas. The next major attack came on 27 January 1977, after Lieutenant-Colonel Sabino Sandele gathered a large group of guerrillas in the vicinity of Andulo in Bié province, and overran the town, claiming to have killed 97 government troops.<sup>16</sup> On 9 February 1977, it was the town of Mungo, in Huambo province – defended by the equivalent of an infantry company – that was targeted by a well-coordinated assault from 250 FALA fighters. This began at 0540 hrs in the morning, when 25 insurgents approached from the north and killed two sentries. Minutes later, another 125 men opened fire from the south with a mixture of FN/FAL, AK-47 and M1 rifles and carbines, Browning machine guns, and mortars. Once the garrison had taken position to face the new threat, a



Jonas Savimbi, leader of UNITA and top commander of the FALA. Visible in the background is a Chinese-provided multiple rocket launcher mounted on a truck. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



FALA's commanders mustering their youthful combatants, somewhere in the bush of south-eastern Angola. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

last group of 100 men launched the decisive attack from the east, and quickly overran the locality, before withdrawing because of incoming FAPLA reinforcements. UNITA claimed to have killed 50 enemy in Mungo, among which were the spouses of seven FAPLA militants. By then, the conflict had turned merciless and it became the standard practice of UNITA to execute any captured FAPLA officer.

The slackening of government pressure allowed UNITA to gather thousands of its militants in Bunjei, in Huila province, and to hold its '4th Congress'. During the event, the movement was clearly

confident in its ability to expand not only available formations but also territories under its control or influence.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, by early 1977, the situation was less than satisfactory from the government perspective, according to a CIA assessment concluding;

The largest counterinsurgency campaigns undertaken by the FAPLA/Cuban forces have been against UNITA. These offensives failed to reach their basic objective and in early 1977 encountered strong opposition, leaving government forces largely restricted to a defensive posture within garrisons.<sup>18</sup>

### Tomashevich's Offensives

UNITA's optimism was premature. By mid-1977, General Tomashevich took over the command of the MMCA: this officer was highly-experienced in COIN warfare since the 1960s, when he held the position of the Head of the LCB in the Central Force of the FAR, which was in charge of dealing with anti-Castrist guerrillas in the Escambray Mountains of Cuba.<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, he was determined to resume an aggressive stance against the fast-growing UNITA, and an entire series of large-scale operations was to follow by the end of 1979.

In early 1977, the FAPLA had concentrated 9 out of its 13 Tactical Groups and 43 out of its 57 light infantry battalions against UNITA/FALA. Cuban advisors, mostly from the RLCBM, were present in the HQs of all these and in most of their attached battalions. By then, the ODP was also maintaining a presence in virtually all the country

municipalities.

In May of that year, five FAPLA battalions took part in Operation *Ferro*, intending to clear the Bailundo area, used by the insurgents as a rear-base to strike the Benguela railways. When the operation ended, the government forces claimed to have captured 150 weapons, destroyed 24 enemy bases, released 3,000 civilians and killed or captured 500 insurgents.<sup>20</sup>

This did not prevent FALA from concentrating several columns and launching an attack against the border town of Cuangar on 12 July 1977. The assault was completely unexpected by the small



garrison, and the insurgents even destroyed an An-26 of the FAPA/DAA while the later was trying to take-off from the local airstrip. On 30 July, the government forces launched Operation Cuangar to retake the town. A large combined-arms column including armoured vehicles and several artillery and anti-aircraft artillery batteries left Menongue and advanced to Caiundo and Candeale, where it arrived on 12 August and met with another two FAPLA infantry battalions. However, this enterprise was plagued by logistical deficiencies, and noticeably the lack of available vehicles for the two latter units. In turn, massive delays occurred before the operation could be resumed. Hence, it was only on 19 November 1977 that FAPLA troops retook Cuangar.

Meanwhile, in mid-August 1977 the FAPLA and MMCA completed their preparations for a much larger operation, code-named *Comandante Dangereux*. No fewer than 23 battalions attached to the GT-1, GT-2, GT-3 and GT-4 were mobilized while a dedicated advanced HQ was set up in Huambo. As usual, Cuban advisors from the RLCBM embedded in both in the advanced HQ and the GT's headquarters. The multi-pronged offensive began on 22 August and covered parts of the provinces of Huambo, Bié, Benguela and Kwanza South. *Comandante Dangereux* ended after a few weeks with mixed results: several FAPLA battalions were ambushed during their advances. Indeed, on one occasion, an entire unit was routed and its Cuban advisors barely avoided death or capture. Specifically: FAPLA Battalion 409 was informed about the presence of a small UNITA camp in the village of Bimbe and advanced toward it – only to be caught in a well-coordinated two-pincer enemy attack. A company-strength FALA group then attacked a subunit of the battalion early in the morning while it was laagering near the village. Suddenly, around 300 other insurgents armed only with makeshift weapons charged from another direction as soon as the FAPLA troops were committed against the first enemy group. The FAPLA soldiers panicked and fled after exhausting their ammunition, leaving their eleven Cuban advisors behind. However, these resisted and the insurgents retreated – leaving seven KIA behind. Three Angolan soldiers died and another five were wounded during the skirmish.

The GT's HQs failed to coordinate their advances efficiently



FALA insurgents with a rarely-seen Egyptian-made Qadr Wallid APCs in 1977. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Another view of a FAPLA-operated Qadr Wallid APC knocked out by UNITA in 1977. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

enough, thus creating gaps that were used by the guerrillas to avoid encirclement. Hence, only five FALA bases were taken, 128 weapons captured and 280 insurgents taken prisoners. However, the offensive had forced the FALA units in the targeted areas to scatter into small groups and to move continuously to avoid capture. It also disrupted the guerrilla's logistical infrastructure, noticeably by taking away from the bush thousands of peasants who were providing it with food supplies. As a result, FALA moved the bulk of its mobile guerrilla force out the area and toward the Cuando-Cubango province.

*Comandante Dangereux* continued on a lesser scale until the end of 1978, thus preventing the insurgents from re-establishing themselves in force in the area. It was followed by two other operations both entirely conducted by the Angolans: Operation *Limpeza* in October, in eastern Angola, and Operation *Mártires del 27 de Mayo*, in central Angola in October and November 1977. By the end of that year, the MMCA assessment was rather contradictory; it acknowledged that UNITA was actually increasing the number of its ambushes and mine laying operations but also considered that government forces

were nonetheless gaining the upper hand, noticeably because the loss ratio between FAPLA and the insurgents reached 1 to 9 – and that according to the MMCA-sources.<sup>21</sup>

By early 1978, the HQ MMCA decided to tackle the insurgent's concentration in Cuando-Cubango province, especially so as UNITA's top leadership had moved there too. Even worse, available intelligence assessed that Savimbi was assembling thousands of fighters in the triangle between Menongue – Vila Nova de Armada – Caiundo, and prepared large-scale assaults against the towns of Cuito Cuanavale, Longa and Mavinga. The triangle was suspected to harbour a large number of UNITA depots and bases, especially so as FAPLA had limited its activities in the region to clearing operations along the two main roads in the area. Furthermore, in October 1977, FALA detachments had seized Mucusso, Calai and Dirico, both located near the Namibian border, thus increasing its control over large parts of the latter.<sup>22</sup>

### Menongue and Crystal

Preparations for the new operation, code-named *Menongue*, began in February 1978, when a FAR motorized task force consisting of four infantry companies (drawn from four different RIMs) and various support and artillery platoons – 156 APCs and other vehicles in total – was assembled in Huambo before moving to Menongue, where it arrived on 20 February 1978. This mechanized element reinforced the FAPLA's GT that was covering the province and garrisoned Cuchi, Caiundo, Longa, Menongue, Vila Nova de Armada, Caiundo Luengue and Mavinda. Indeed, the Menongue operation was deemed as necessary to pre-empt enemy large-scale attacks against these towns – which were assessed as imminent by Angolan and Cuban intelligence. FAPA helicopters and jets were also relocated to bases within range of the targeted areas in order to support the offensive, but suffered their next loss: on 24 February a Mi-8 was damaged by insurgent small-arm fire 30km from Menongue, and two people onboard were wounded as a result.

On 28 February, FAPLA Battalion 561 initiated the offensive by taking the HQ of UNITA's Military Region 91. The FALA suffered heavy losses as the battalion advance was supported by airpower: Mi-8s conducted air strikes against suspected insurgent camps and landed an airborne company to cut off the escape of the retreating enemy. This move surprised the guerrillas who broke in panic while running away down their only escape route.

The defeat caused tensions within UNITA's high command: Cuban SIGINT intercepted messages where Savimbi blamed the

Military Region 91 commander for failing to offer determined resistance. In the meantime, the UNITA leader also ordered several of his commanders to concentrate their forces to strike in another direction. On 6 March, around 300 FALA guerrillas attacked Cuito Cuanavale but were repulsed by the local garrison. Meanwhile, the FAR and FAPLA had reorganized their order of battle to continue their offensive. The FAR Motorized Battalion and FAPLA Battalion 561 were combined to create three different mixed battalions and designated 1 Bon, 2 Bon and 3 Bon. Three companies of airborne infantry supported these.

The operation resumed on 7 March, targeting UNITA's main



A group of FALA insurgents undergoing training on a German-made MG34 light machine gun, in 1977. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A Boeing 737 airliner of TAAG Angola, against the backdrop of Huambo Airport – one of the major logistical hubs for all Cuban and Angolan operations in south-eastern Angola of the late 1970s and 1980s, and the main base of the Cuban RLCBM (Regiment for Combat against Mercenary Bands). (Albert Grandolini Collection)



HQ, and continued until 1 April. During these three weeks, the three battalions advanced separately in coordination with the airborne companies that were repeatedly deployed to conduct vertical envelopments. Cuban-flown MiG's conducted several airstrikes against the enemy HQ.

Ultimately, Operation *Menongue* provided similar results as the *Comandante Dangereux* operation. It disrupted enemy infrastructures and logistics, but the bulk of the insurgents escaped from the trap without much difficulty. Indeed, the lack of roads and the large number of rivers constantly impeded the movement of the motorized columns. The task of pilots was also immensely complicated by the dense foliage that provided ample cover for the insurgents – to the point that a major (and very large) training camp was detected only because one helicopter overflying it was fired upon by heavy machine guns.<sup>23</sup>

### Take the Border

The FAPLA next prepared Operation *Take the Border* (*Toma de la Frontera*). This was an entirely Angolan-organized and planned offensive that took place between 20 June and 30 August 1978. No fewer than 13 battalions advanced along two main axes towards the South West African border and retook the localities of Cuangar, Calai, Dirico and Mucusso, which had been lost in October. The operation proved successful because the FALA forces in the area did not attempt to resist.<sup>24</sup>

In September and October 1978, Cuban intelligence obtained clues about Savimbi's location again, and this triggered the launching of a massive new operation which took part roughly in the areas along the limits of the Cunene and Cuando-Cubango provinces. A dedicated HQ was established in Menongue on 17 October, and reinforcements rushed to the operational area. Between 17 and 24 October, six battalions (including one Cuban) advanced methodically along the road from Cubango to Menongue while helicopters were dropping airborne platoons to ambush the withdrawing insurgents. The first phase of the operation ended without delivering any decisive results as Jonas Savimbi and his bodyguards avoided – barely – being caught by one of the ambushes. The FAPLA and FAR then reorganized their forces and inducted new reinforcements before launching the second phase of Operation *Crystal*, on 26 October. This time, the bulk of the infantry battalions advanced south of the road between Cubango and Menongue while several infantry companies and airborne platoons operated in UNITA's Military Region 63 and took the local HQ. Operation *Crystal* ended on 8 December 1978, by which time 148 insurgents had been killed, while 194 weapons, four trucks, five radios, hundreds of uniforms and 30 tons of food were captured. As a whole, a total of around 1,600 weapons were captured by government forces during 1978.

By early 1979, the offensives against UNITA had diminished the insurgent ability to organize ambushes. The number of such actions dropped from an average of 20 per month in 1978 to 8 during the first half of 1979. However, the COIN campaign against UNITA remained plagued by the same basic flaw – there were never enough troops, and then by a long way. As of mid-1978, only six battalions were available in the entire Moxico province (200,000 square kilometres) while even the 18 battalions operating in the much smaller Huambo province were not enough to clear UNITA out of their area of responsibility. Indeed, and while supposed to control immense and under-populated territories, the actual FAPLA COIN-units had an effective strength only roughly equivalent to that of the FALA. correspondingly, concentrating forces in one region quickly became counterproductive because it would enable the insurgents

to remain undisturbed in another. Hence, it is hardly surprising that the major COIN operations were all targeting UNITA leadership; in case of success, the movement would have been devastated in a single blow. While they failed to do precisely this, operations such as *Comandante Dangereux*, *Menongue* or *Crystal* kept the insurgent threat under control, but not much more.<sup>25</sup>

### MMCA's withdrawal from LCB

Strikingly, and despite this mixed picture, the Cubans ended their involvement in the counter-insurgency warfare during 1979. The RLCBM was withdrawn, as were the advisors embedded in the FAPLA COIN units. Until that time, as many as seven of FAPLA's GTs involved against UNITA, as well as 30 battalions, had Cuban advisors and their supporting elements embedded.<sup>26</sup>

According to Savimbi, this withdrawal of both RCLBM and advisors was a relief, because Cuban or mixed Angolan-Cuban units were much more harder to deal with than other units for his guerrillas;

Where you had the MPLA they made noise during the night, they made fire. There was confusion you could even hear them firing their guns. But where the Cubans were, there was discipline. Sometimes, if they created a new post we would run into it [unaware, author's note] because they were quiet and disciplined.<sup>27</sup>

Even worse, Cuban withdrawal came roughly at the time FAPLA was reorganizing its COIN forces from Tactical Groups to Light Infantry Brigades. Thus, the COIN units were withdrawn in 1978, but when reengaged in combat after a large-scale reshuffling, they did so without the support of instructors upon which their commanding officers were used to relying upon. They also had to operate within more complex structures and with a number of recently promoted officers and specialists that were necessary to man and lead all the new support units activated to complete these Brigades TO&Es (Tables of Organisation and Equipment).

Officially, Cuban disengagement was not only because UNITA had been weakened but also because FAPLA unit effectiveness and proficiency had sufficiently increased to allow them to operate successfully on their own. However, this rosy picture was hiding a darker reality. Actually, tensions were rising between the Cubans and the Angolans at the time. Aside of being left in the dark by Luanda before both the Shaba I and II operations, the Cubans felt that the Angolans were not doing enough in the ongoing counter-insurgency campaign against the UNITA. Noticeably, and while available troops were lacking, the FAPLA regular brigades – already much favoured in terms of manpower and equipment allocation – were kept out of COIN operations. Although by doing that FAPLA was merely following the advice of the Soviet military mission, this incensed the Cubans: from their perspective, FAPLA should have committed itself completely against UNITA, while the MMCA was supposed to shield the country against any foreign invasion. Furthermore, behind closed doors, Cuban officers were critical of the FAPLA leadership. Fidel Castro himself confessed his preoccupations to Erich Honecker, the German Democratic Republic leader, during a meeting in April 1977:

The Defense Ministry is doing hardly anything to fight bandits in the north and south of the country. [...] The Angolan Defense Ministry underestimates the fight against the bandits. We understand that the Soviet military advisers are primarily



A UNITA armoured truck, as seen early during the war. (Photo by Al J Venter)

requested to help them to organize the regular army and are not interested in helping in the fight against bandits. It is difficult for us to fight against the bandits on our own. Our comrades have had a lot of difficulties and have spent many bitter hours fighting them. The Cubans cannot do it alone. [...] The major share must however be carried out by the Angolans themselves. [...] We also cannot commit our troops to the fight against bandits because women and children are being killed in these battles and we cannot take on such a responsibility.<sup>28</sup>

On the other side, the predominant role played by the Cuban advisors both in the military and economic fields created resentment among Angolan officials, as they felt patronized by their mentors. Furthermore, the Angolans had concluded that strengthening their relations with Western countries, including the USA, was the only way to address the intractable problems plaguing their economy too, and this could hardly have pleased both the Cubans and the Soviets. Indeed, the Cuban civilian advisors' presence in Angola diminished too, falling from 7,000 early 1979 to 4,000 two years later. These were partly replaced by technical experts from countries such as Portugal.<sup>29</sup> By 1979, even several members of the Central Committee MPLA began to manoeuvre to reduce the Cuban influence in the armed forces – with straightforward results, as made crystal clear in the annexes of a secret Cuban memorandum prepared in early February 1984, after a meeting between Abelardo Colomé, Ulises Rosales and Konstantin Kurochkin.

The mistakes made by the Angolan leadership and the lack of capacity of the FAPLA high command have reduced the effectiveness of the military collaboration that we and you [the Soviets] have provided there, favoring a low level of use of our military presence for the fight against UNITA [...]. This cooperation [in counter-insurgency operations] was interrupted at the end of 1979, when anti-Cuban intrigue within the Central Committee MPLA forced us to suspend this collaboration.<sup>30</sup>

### The Cassinga Shock

After the failure of *Savannah*, the SADF kept a low profile, and conducted only small-scale cross-border operations with special units such as the 32nd Battalion and the Recces regiment, targeting small PLAN bases close to the border. However, with the constant augmentation of PLAN infiltrations in South West Africa between 1976 and 1978, the South African military concluded that limiting themselves to counter-insurgency operations in South West Africa would never be enough to tame the flow without simultaneously targeting the guerrilla's rear bases in Angola. In April 1978, Pretoria decided to change tack,

and launch a large-scale and deep penetration in Angola, Operation *Reindeer*, targeting the PLAN base of Chetequera, 22 kilometres from the border and Cassinga, a large SWAPO facility located 260 kilometres from South West Africa. The former was to be dealt with by ground forces while an airborne assault was prepared against Cassinga. Early in the morning of 4 May 1978, four English Electric Canberra B(1).Mk 12 bombers and four Blackburn/Hawker Siddeley Buccaneer S.Mk 50 fighter-bombers disgorged their loads of Alpha cluster bomb units (CBUs) and 1,000lbs (454kg) bombs over the camp. Six C-130 and C-160 transport aircraft from No.28 Squadron SAAF followed in their wake and dropped 250 paratroopers, who regrouped and began to invest the camp that they cleared against determined enemy resistance during the next hours. Once their missions were completed, Puma and Super Frelon helicopters extracted the paratroopers.<sup>31</sup>

The HQ MMCA reacted swiftly. General Harold Ferrer Martinez, CO of RIM South was instructed by General Tomashevich to reinforce the beleaguered camp as fast as possible. The task fell on GT-2, a combined-arms battalion based in Tchamutete, a mere 15 kilometres from Cassinga. GT-2 was a small but powerful unit, entirely Cuban-manned, with one T-34/85-equipped tank company, at least two motorized infantry companies with BTR-152s and BTR-60s, and artillery and AAA detachments – everything needed to defeat the South African paratroopers. However, the MMCA was caught completely unprepared by the attack against Cassinga, especially so in the crucial aspect of airpower. Virtually all available MiG-21 and MiG-17 fighters had been withdrawn to Luanda AB only weeks before and the only combat aircraft available on short notice were four MiG-17Fs in Lubango. Four MiG-21 and two helicopters were also ordered to rally to Menongue, but the first jet, a MiG-21UB, arrived there only on the morning of 5 May, together with Mi-8 serial H-10 – much too late to provide any air cover for GT-2. Accordingly, GT-2 was reinforced on the spot with all available AAA batteries, mostly ZPU-2 and ZPU-4 14.5mm HMGs.

However, GT-2's dash toward Cassinga turned into disaster. It was first delayed by an ambush laid by a paratrooper anti-tank platoon. Furthermore, once the column was detected, the SAAF





A Canberra B(I).Mk 12 bomber from No. 12 Squadron, SAAF, underway low over the bush of southern Angola. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

rushed a pair of Mirage IIICZs from No. 2 Squadron and a single Buccaneer from No. 24 Squadron to the scene. Their repeated attacks proved devastating, as related by Captain Dries Marais, the Buccaneer pilot;

As I rolled into my dive attack on the tanks, which had by now reached the outskirts of Cassinga, in front of me, just settling into their attack were the two Mirages. The 30mm HE rounds of the first one exploded ineffectively on the lead tank and I called out to the second aircraft to leave the tanks alone and go for the personal carriers. [...]

Turning round for another pass, we could see the first tank burning like a furnace, and on this run, the lead Mirage pilot destroyed no fewer than five BTRs with a long burst [...] then our second salvo of 12 rockets, every third one with an armour-piercing head, also struck home.

In a matter of seconds, two tanks and about 16 armoured personnel carriers had been completely destroyed, and then the Mirages were down to their minimum combat fuel and they had to retire leaving us with the rest.

We decided to concentrate on the tanks, and then things started happening. Most of the BTR's were trailing twin-barrelled 14.5mm anti-aircraft guns, and some of them were now deployed and shooting at us. Even one of the tanks was firing with its main weapon and I remembered being amused at the gunner's optimism at hitting a manoeuvring target travelling at 600 knots.<sup>32</sup>

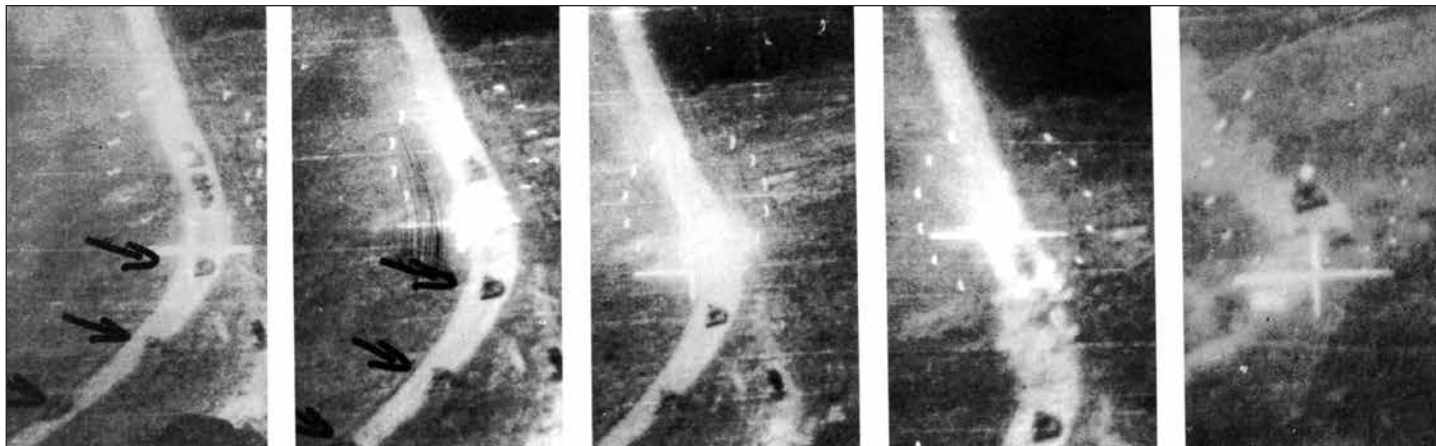
Indeed, GT-2 anti-aircraft gunners and MANPADS operators did their best to oppose the enemy aircraft, but to no avail, as described by Sergeant Eduardo Pérez Rojas, who was in charge of one of the Cuban AA-guns and gave a vivid description of being on the receiving end of air strikes while in the open;



A Buccaneer fighter-bomber of the SAAF seen while unleashing 68mm unguided rockets in a dive – as during attacks on the GT-2 column approaching Cassinga. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Then the aircraft attacked again with viciousness. They wounded Rafael Estévez and we tried to evacuate him, but he said he would continue to fight. Antolin Garcia was [...] riddled with the fragments of a rocket; he died hours later with a picture of his little son clenched in his hands. The truck that was towing the gun operated by Eusebio stopped in the middle of the embankment [...]. A rocket killed Eusebio and the gunner took over and continued firing incessantly; when they took him off the gun, almost by force, they noticed that his legs were pierced by the shrapnel.<sup>33</sup>

The Cubans fired two SA-7s in quick succession, but both failed to function. Later on, they assessed their ZPUs as 'ineffective' – wrongly so: the big Buccaneer fighter bomber survived its several low altitude passes over the column only by miracle, and the outstanding skills of the pilot who managed to nurse it back to base. The South African mechanics counted 17 hits on the aircraft, including several through the engines and one through the windscreen. Nonetheless, GT-2 was devastated, with at least three T-34s destroyed, as well as one BRDM-2, one BTR-60PB, and seven other vehicles. At least 16 Cuban soldiers were killed and another 76 wounded during the battle. The An-26 with registration T-50, attached directly to the MMCA, was sent to Tchamutete to evacuate these casualties.



A gun-camera sequence taken by one of two SAAF Mirage IIICZs involved in attacks on the GT-2 column outside Cassinga on 4 May 1981. Clearly visible are at least three T-34 tanks and multiple other vehicles. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A still from a video of the Cuban crew of FAPA/DAA Mi-8 serial number H-10 with their mount in 1981. They arrived much too late to take part in the battle of Cassinga. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A still from a video showing fresh FAR troops disembarking from a ship in the port of Luanda in mid-1978. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

However, the head of the column did reach Cassinga on time to perturb the evacuation of the last South Africans paratroopers.<sup>34</sup>

### The Primera Línea

Since the very beginning of Operation *Carlota* (the Cuban military intervention in Angola initiated in 1975), the Cubans had a healthy

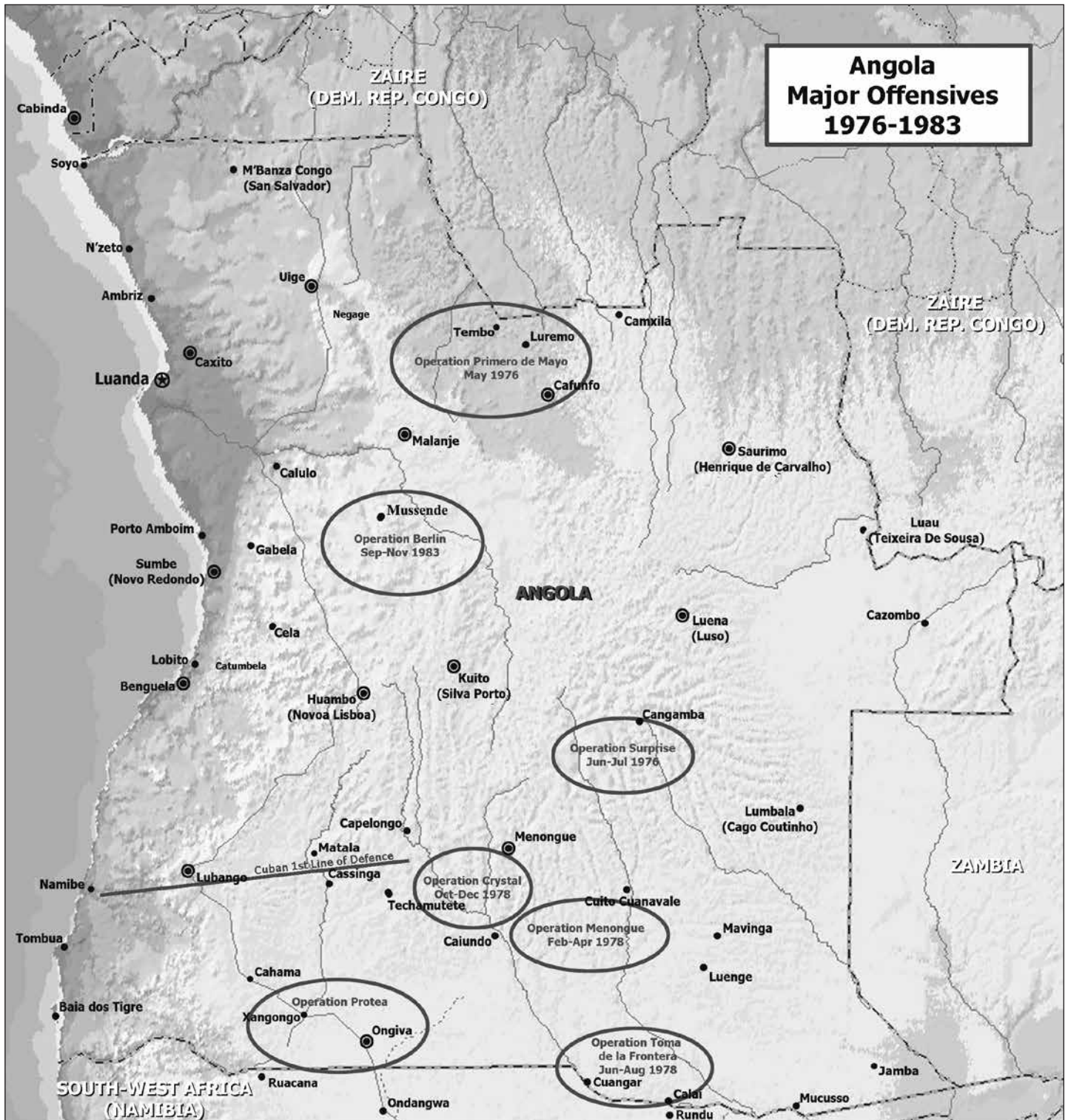
respect for the SAAF, and were aware that the latter completely outclassed both their DAAFAR contingent in Angola as well as the still nascent FAPA/DAA which, by 1978, did not have any combat capabilities. The experience of GT-2 at Cassinga emphasised this conclusion beyond any doubt; sustained mechanized operations would be pointless without the ability to neutralize or at least impede the SAAF. Furthermore, the Cassinga affair took place almost at the same time as Shaba II, which ended with the presence of French and Belgian troops in Zaire. These circumstances had far reaching consequences upon the Cuban deployment in Angola. First,

Havana decided to reinforce the MMCA, and from June 1978 on, an increased number of flights between Cuba and Angola raised the size of the contingent from 20,000 men at the end of 1977 to 23,000 men by early 1979.

Accordingly, by March 1979, all the MMCA units in southern Angola were withdrawn – thus abandoning towns such as Cahama and Tchamutete. They concentrated instead along the 700-kilometre long so-called *primera línea* (first line), on average 250 kilometres north of the border with South West Africa. This ran from the Namibe harbour through Matala and ended in Menongue, thus covering all the direct roads leading to central Angola. In the meantime, the FAPLA regular units took over the positions vacated by their FAR counterparts. This line had several major advantages; several sections ran through much more defensible terrain, it eased logistics as it followed or was connected with major communications infrastructure and it was closer to the available airbases – while farther away from SAAF bases in South West Africa – this was a crucial aspect considering the shorter range of the Cuban MiG's compared to the SAAF combat aircraft.

The FAR units did not intend to occupy the 700km line, but concentrated their forces in several key communications nodes, like Namibe, Lubango, Matala, Cubango and Jambo, where they





A map of Angola with areas in which most important Angolan and Cuban COIN operations of the period 1976-1978 were undertaken, and the *Primera Linea*, constructed by the FAR in 1979-1980 period. (Map by Tom Cooper)

began to build extensive defensive systems. In the longer term, the Cubans also intended to build a powerful air-defence umbrella over their first line. This process began with the creation of a nominally FAPA/DAA – but largely Cuban-manned – air defence brigade. Until the end of 1980, the order of battle expanded – because of the reinforcements dispatched from Cuba but also by re-locating units garrisoned in other parts of the country. In this fashion, the whole MMCA was reshuffled; RIM North moved from Negage to Dando and RIM Centre from Malanje to Quibala, RIM South disappeared while RIM Lubango and RIM Matala came into being. RIM East was re-baptized RIM Huambo after moving to the latter

city. Thus, and while the MMCA continued to maintain units in Cabinda, Luanda, Malanje, Quibala and Luso, the bulk of Cuban forces were now stationed in the south.<sup>35</sup>

### 3

## GALO NEGRO

The MMCA's disengagement from the struggle against UNITA arguably came at the worst possible time. Not only was FAPLA reorganizing its COIN assets from the tactical groups' structure into the BrIL's, and accordingly reducing the pace of its operations at the same time, but the insurgents were regrouping and rebuilding their forces, and rapidly into a much more dangerous threat – and this for a vast array of different factors.

Arguably, the most decisive one was political. The MPLA and its allies invariably described UNITA as a 'South African Proxy', and as such virtually a 'mercenary outfit doing the Apartheid regime's bidding'. For the Western countries that were sympathetic to the movement, UNITA was the opposite; 'Freedom fighters' fighting in the name of a liberal democracy against Communist totalitarianism. Both these perceptions were partial at best, and hid the fact that the movement could count on real support in the Angolan rural areas, especially so among the Ovimbundu ethnic group. From its very beginning, UNITA was un-dissociable from the figure of Jonas Savimbi, who created it and led it. Indeed, 'Galo Negro', (black cock, referring to UNITA's flag) was often used to name both the movement and its president. While ruthless and extremely ambitious, Savimbi was also a highly charismatic and politically astute figure, excelling in modelling and evolving the movement's discourse, and hence, its ideology, to its needs.

Unsurprisingly, UNITA's political discourse could borrow from socialist ideas while advocating a liberal democracy, but was also conservative, anchored into the peasantry traditions and belief systems. Indeed, alleged witches or sorcerers were trialled and if found guilty, either publicly burned or drowned.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, the movement defined itself as 'Christian', supporting and being supported by the Church – in contrast to the Marxist and thus 'atheist' MPLA. An even more fundamental aspect of UNITA's

ideology was its claim to incarnate Angolan 'true nationalism', the one of the 'Angolan black people', against the MPLA's Afro-Portuguese and former assimilated leaders.<sup>2</sup> In UNITA's racial view, the MPLA was a continuation of Portugal's colonial system, a puppet of Soviet imperialism, and then a Cuban lackey. Savimbi himself excelled into emphasizing one aspect or the other of this multi-faceted ideology according to his interlocutors – from Western journalists visiting his headquarter to assemblies of Ovimbundu peasants. While the later ethnic group remained its more important political basis since UNITA's inception, and Ovimbundu was the movement's *lingua franca*, Savimbi always took care to promote in its leadership people from other ethnic groups.<sup>3</sup> As so often, it would be misleading to read UNITA only through the ethnic lens. Indeed, in its origin, the movement was initially composed of people from different ethnic backgrounds, without one dominating the others – and found it difficult to establish the first guerrilla bases in the areas populated by the Ovimbundu majority. UNITA's political expansion there took place after the Carnation Revolution, and people supported UNITA mainly because it was implementing itself in the rural areas, while the MPLA was concentrating its political work in the towns.<sup>4</sup>

### An African Maoist

Another vital aspect of UNITA's evolution was the training of its initial core. Namely, both Savimbi and a dozen of the early militants went to the People's Republic of China and were initiated into the arcane of Mao Tse Tung's 'People's War Doctrine'. The latter was providing an all-encompassing approach to conduct an insurgency, and hopefully, seize power. The People's War approach was very methodical and sophisticated, but also flexible and easily adaptable to local circumstances. Foreign students trained in China were taught by their Chinese instructors to not apply any precepts blindly,

but to the contrary, adapt them to local circumstances. Savimbi's nine month course in China had a decisive influence on his strategic thinking, and the People's War doctrine thus remained paramount not only in the fabric of UNITA's political strategies and internal organisation, but also on its military apparatus, to the point that UNITA was, despite a very different ideology, one of the most dedicated practitioners of Mao's teachings. Thus, while UNITA benefited at the time from the expertise of French, American, Moroccan and South African advisors, these never influenced the movement's choices on the strategic level.<sup>5</sup>



Gathering of FALA/UNITA combatants at the parade ground at UNITA's HQ in Jamba, with posters typical of the 1980s in the background. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Thus, following the first months of 1976, during which both its political and military wings had been shattered, UNITA patiently and methodically rebuilt itself from the bottom-up, intending to control as much of the population as possible in the countryside. The guerrillas settled in bases in rural areas, before gaining the support of the local populations with a mixture of persuasion and coercion. This allowed the movement to obtain the food necessary to sustain its local infrastructure. In turn, once an area was under control, it was used as a stepping stone to enter other surrounding zones and repeat the process. In the meantime, raids were launched against villages considered as “pro-government”. The process was methodical, but not spectacular, especially so during a period where the central State was still largely absent from the remote areas, thus allowing UNITA to penetrate into a political vacuum. Once in control over an area, the movement organized and corseted the population in a network of structures such as youth and women’s associations or local committees. Following Lenin and Mao’s “Democratic Centralism” pattern, these had significant autonomy – provided they operated in the general direction advocated by the movement leadership. After a few years, UNITA had succeeded in establishing its own para-state in wide areas of Angola. Where practicable, health and education services were provided too. Indeed, by 1978, some UNITA bases could include as many as 2,000 people, militants and civilians included.

In turn, control of the populations allowed the movement to draft ever-increasing numbers of fighters into its ranks. Expanding its influence over populations and building up its forces remained the movement’s strategic objective, and for these reasons, it noticeably avoided engaging in combat with Cuban forces from 1976 to 1979, concentrating its operations against soft targets such as small FAPLA or ODP garrisons. In April 1979, Savimbi, under the pressure of FAPLA-MMCA offensives during the previous years, re-established a permanent headquarters in Jamba. Close to both the Zambian and South West African borders, and located virtually in the remotest part of the country described by the Portuguese as “the Land at the End of the World”, Jamba and the surrounding areas were reasonably safe from the governmental forces’ forays. UNITA thus could claim its control over a “liberated” area and announce the founding of its own republic.<sup>6</sup>

### FALA’s Rebirth

By then, the movement was led by a Politburo (Political Bureau) chaired by Jonas Savimbi, and which emanated from a 35 member Central Committee. By 1982, the Politburo had 14 members, as detailed in Table 8. In turn, this organ controlled the movement’s central organs, the regional committees in charge of civilian affairs, and the armed wing, the *Forças Armadas de Libertação de Angola* (Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola; FALA).<sup>7</sup> Discipline in the movement as a whole, and its armed wing in particular, was strictly enforced. Soldiers caught drunk could be beaten, while desertion was punished by death. Dereliction of duty, such as losing weapons and ammunition, or even stealing food, could also have extremely severe consequences for the culprit, as described by South African Sergeant Johan Anderson, from 32nd Battalion about FALA troops’ living conditions in 1985;

Well, they had food, but not in big quantities, and they really had a hard life because, while we drove to operations, they used to walk most of the way. They were really scrawny, but hard, kids, if you can call them that...It was quite an eye-opener...the guys with ranks in UNITA, the ‘alferes’ (lieutenants), they really felt

**Table 8: UNITA Politburo, 1982<sup>10</sup>**

Title	Rank	Name
President		Jonas Savimbi
Secretary General	Brigadier	Miguel N’Zau Puna
Chief of Staff FALA	Brigadier	Demosthenes Chilingutilla
Liaison to South Africa	Brigadier	Samuel Epalanga
Senior Political Commissar	Colonel	Geraldo Nunda
	Colonel	Antonio Vakulakuta
Secretary for Foreign Affairs		Jeremias Chitunda
Chief of Operations FALA	Colonel	Renato Mateus
Secretary of Economic Affairs		Ernesto Mulato
Representative in West Germany		Carlos Kandanda
Charge of Relations to Zaire		Antonio Dembo
Secretary for Justice	Colonel	Smart Chatta
Secretary of Central Committee		Eugenio Ngolo
Representative in Great Britain (and elsewhere abroad)		Tito Chingunji

**Table 9: FALA Military Regions, 1978-1980<sup>11</sup>**

Front	Military Regions
Central Front	11, 25, 29, 41, 45, 50, 89, 90
Eastern Front	15, 22, 33, 57
Southern Front	17, 37, 55, 91
Western Front	19, 49, 63, 65, 71

nothing for those kids...and I remember one night we heard a shot and we went to have a look. It was a UNITA soldier who had stolen a rat pack and the alferes had seen it and shot him in the leg. I mean, the guy was hungry, let him have his rat pack; he is not the enemy...you can discipline him another way. However, that was UNITA’s way and they were our “friends”.<sup>8</sup>

Among the leadership, being perceived as a threat to the president could easily turn fatal, and several executions of UNITA top leaders took place with time. During its early years, FALA recruited only on a voluntary basis, but this progressively began to change from the end of the 1970s on, noticeably because the branch needed to fuel its expansion and replace its losses. As a result, conscription in UNITA-controlled areas – or even outright forced-recruitment – became more and more frequent. On the other hand, the movement continued to devote considerable resources to provide ideological education to its recruits. Each FALA unit also had a political commissar attached.<sup>9</sup>

Unsurprisingly, by 1978, FALA was composed of several kinds of units. Around 3,000 barely armed and trained militia were mainly responsible for controlling the local population: they were more or less static and thus classified as ‘local forces’. The second layer was provided by around 8,000 guerrillas, widely dispersed, lacking



Guerrillas of FALA/UNITA presenting their FN/FAL and G3 assault rifles during the morning parade. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



The local guerrilla groups of FALA/UNITA also included female combatants. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

supporting arms and operating in small groups. These were adequate for small-scale harassment actions. Finally, the third layer included around 4,000 men.<sup>12</sup> These were much better armed, wore at least some kind of uniforms, and were organized in companies with between 100 and 200 men each. Some of these units even had some 81mm mortars and 75mm recoilless rifles. All FALA forces operated under military regions, of which at least 19 existed at the end of 1978, but the guerrilla companies in particular could be moved from one region to another. These military regions were led by a colonel or lieutenant-colonel, and divided into sectors and then into zones. Military regions were attached to four fronts, led by brigadiers or colonels.

Indeed, FALA routinely grouped several companies for large operations. Furthermore, guerrilla companies increasingly operated under a tighter leash, while as a whole, the current system began to show its limitations; it was adequate to wear down government forces with multiple small-scale attacks but inadequate for large-

scale operations, as explained by Savimbi in 1977 and 1978 to Western journalists:

I'm pleased with our guerrilla operations so far, but the price has been too high. Too many men and officers have been killed when we attack the towns. Many of our guerrillas are just thrown together momentarily to attack a town and it is too uncoordinated, too undisciplined... 'Captains of 200-man companies in their enthusiasm were attacking MPLA posts and having 20 or more of our men killed without capturing the posts. So I put out an order saying no local commander could attack a post without first consulting me by radio. Then before I said yes or no, I would examine with the Chief of Staff what manpower and firepower any one group had and what mastery of military techniques. Minor actions like ambushes and laying mines they could continue without referring to anybody.<sup>13</sup>

UNITA/FALA benefited very early on, at least from 1977, from an excellent radio network that made such control possible. In March 1977, UNITA held its Fourth Congress and one of the main resolutions taken on this occasion was to form semi-regular battalions, and thus, launching mobile warfare operations. These

new forces were intended to be heavier-armed than the guerrilla forces. More importantly, they had to train to conduct much more complex operations than the guerrilla's standard hit and run and ambush tactics. They were to be engaged only under favourable circumstances, and thus needed to operate in close coordination with militia and guerrilla units, which were to act as their eyes and ears, thus shielding them from enemy conventional forces. Indeed, Savimbi, remaining as always a dedicated follower of Maoist strategy, described the ideal ratio of semi-regular to guerrillas at 10%. Furthermore, once they came into being, FALA semi-regular units did not engage into slugging matches with the enemy if that could be avoided, and for instance, always left avenues of escape for the FAPLA garrisons defending the towns they were attacking, as explained by FALA Colonel "Ben-Ben" Arlindo Pena to journalist Fred Bridgland in early 1983:

It is always so in our attacks. If the enemy feel trapped they resist



heavily and our casualties increase. In our kind of war we must keep our soldiers' morale high, so it is more important to keep our casualties light than to inflict heavy losses on the enemy.<sup>14</sup>

However, UNITA's 1977 master plan of escalating the war by launching mobile warfare and creating semi-regular forces would have remained mere wishful thinking if the movement had remained isolated. These plans required not only a massive influx of weapons and equipment, but also expertise. Even if the movement emphasized self-sufficiency and developed at the earliest opportunity its own cottage industry to support its armed wing, all of this would have remained insufficient for the built-up it envisioned.<sup>15</sup>

### Pretoria's return

After their withdrawal at the end of March 1976, the SADF continued to provide a trickle of support to UNITA under Operation *Silver*. Colonel Filip du Preez was in charge of coordinating the operation, but it consisted mainly of providing small quantities of weapons, ammunition and food. Indeed, around 1,400 tons of weapons and ammunition were delivered in 1977 and 1978 alone – with a marked increase during the second of these two years. Indeed, in 1978, Defence Minister Pieter Willem Botha – renowned as a hardliner – became the South African Prime Minister. Botha met Savimbi on 10 December of the same year and formalized a long-term agreement: the SADF was to massively expand its support to UNITA and in return, the latter would keep SWAPO and PLAN away from south-eastern Angola, thus acting as a bulwark for South West Africa. As FAPA was too weak to reasonably expect to do the same for south-western Angola, SADF units would act instead in that area.<sup>16</sup>

As a result, the quantities of equipment of all kind supplied to the movement rose significantly. Noticeably, at least from 1981 on, the South Africans began to transfer the bulk of the weapons captured during its large-scale operations against FAPLA to UNITA, including heavy weapons such as 76mm ZiS-3 guns, 14.5mm ZPU heavy machine guns, and (Yugoslav-made) 20mm Zastava M55 guns – and even T-34/85 tanks. FALA also began to benefit from South African-run large-scale training programs, conducted in South West Africa, in camps such as the Dodge City military base in the Caprivi strip. UNITA was also allowed to use South West Africa as a rear-base and logistical hub to tranship consignments sent from other countries. Coordination between FALA and SADF also intensified. Furthermore, with time, SADF units, foremost the 32nd Battalion and the Recces, increasingly assisted FALA for specific operations, or even acted directly in its stead. From UNITA's perspective, the cooperation with South Africa had contradictory effects. On the one hand, it was anything but a junior partner in this alliance as both parts were mutually dependent; UNITA needed the SADF to expand, while the SADF needed a strong UNITA to contain SWAPO – and acting as camouflage under which it could operate at will in southern Angola. On the other hand, the alliance with the Apartheid regime was anathema for most of the other African countries, as well as major segments of the Western public. Unsurprisingly, Jonas Savimbi always publicly emphasised the support his movement received from other countries and downplayed that provided by the South Africans.<sup>17</sup>

### African Safari Consortium

The USA in general and the CIA in particular were unable to provide any direct support to UNITA because the US Congress imposed an amendment to the US Arms Export Control Act of 1976, known as the 'Clark Amendment', which barred aid to groups engaged



A still from a video showing one of FALA's mortar teams being trained by SADF advisors. (Adrien Fontanellaz Collection)



Another still from the same video, showing the training of FALA's machine-gunners on Browning M2s. (Adrien Fontanellaz Collection)

in military or paramilitary operations in Angola. While there are reports according to which Israel stepped in as a proxy arms supplier to UNITA, there is no doubt that the resulting void was willingly filled by an array of other actors too. Foremost amongst these was a wide-ranging coalition known as the 'African Safari' or 'Safari Club', whose involvement played a decisive role in the UNITA resurgence of the late 1970s. France's External Documentation and Counter-Espionage Service (*Service de Documentation Extérieure et de Contre-Espionnage*, SDECE) was the cornerstone of the consortium, under the aegis of its head, Alexandre de Marenches, himself a fierce and dedicated anti-communist.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, SDECE progressively entered into alliances with countries such as Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, and Tunisia with the specific purpose of opposing "Communist" expansion in the African continent, thus ever increasing Paris's ability to intervene in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it could already rely on its close association with a series of virtual client states, such as Gabon or Ivory Coast. By then, the French had also entered in a close alliance with Zaire. From 1977 on, the Safari Club became involved in supporting UNITA, already well known to the SDECE. Indeed, in early 1976, the French service had attempted to deliver helicopters and pilots, and had dispatched a small team of operators to Angola, led by Colonel Ivan de Lignières, to advise FALA forces while the latter were still in control of virtually half of the country. Correspondingly, Jonas Savimbi had plenty of opportunities to meet with sympathetic – and important – figures when he left Angola in September 1977



Provision of French assistance became obvious when the FAR and FAPLA overran several of UNITA's depots – only to find such weapons as the French-made APILAS (Armour-Piercing Infantry Light Arm System). (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A Chinese-made Type-63 MRLS of FALA/UNITA in action. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

for a several months to attract support from abroad. After meeting Mobutu in Zaire, he went to Morocco where he was authorised, by nobody less than King Hassan II, to set-up his movement's external headquarters in Rabat. Unsurprisingly, one of his next steps was to travel to Paris, where he met with SDECE's head. The consortium's aid soon reached staggering proportions, mostly financed by Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Savimbi himself acknowledged receiving US\$10 million in cash between 1977-1979 from 'Gulf States', and Saudi Arabia donated another US\$15 million in 1983 alone. By early 1978, around 450 tons of Chinese-made weapons were unloaded at the port of Matada, in Zaire, every month – always under the supervision of the SDECE – before their transshipment to N'Djili IAP. From here they were flown to UNITA-held territory aboard a motley collection of aircraft, including DC-4s. When, after Shaba II, Mobutu closed this logistical line, the shipments were delivered through South West Africa. Chinese weapons included Type-56 rifles, RPGs, B-10 recoilless guns, 82mm mortars, 12.7mm heavy

machine guns, and a few Type-63 107mm MRLSs. Beijing also trained a small group of FALA fighters in China during 1978. Finally, UNITA also received modern communications equipment and SA-7 MANPADS through the Safari Club link, while Morocco is known to have provided 10,000 uniforms in 1978 alone.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to all of this, the FALA benefited from large-scale training programs. In 1979, about 500 FALA operatives were sent to the Ben Guerir Air Base, near Marrakesh in Morocco, to receive officer's or specialized training. Moroccan and French instructors provided dedicated courses to train FALA's Forward Artillery Observers (FAOs), reconnaissance, communications and intelligence specialists. Furthermore, some FALA troops even went to France to receive commando training at the Mont-de-Marsan commando school. Allegedly, on 30 January 1980, French intelligence operatives also began training a group of 15 FALA intelligence officers in South West Africa. The first Ben Guerir-trained officers and specialists returned to Angola in late 1979. They were, of course, vital for the fast-expanding semi-regular force. For instance, the newly trained FAO and artillerymen drastically increased the efficiency of FALA mortars,

which until 1980 could conduct only barrages targeting specific areas, but were unable to coordinate their fire to cover their infantry on the move, or target specific enemy weapon emplacements or strongholds with sufficient accuracy.<sup>20</sup>

### Strategic Forces

In January 1979, SADF instructors began to train a first batch of 350 guerrillas in Camp Delta, in the Caprivi Strip, for the first FALA semi-regular battalion, and by early April, the unit was operational and deployed in Angola. At least another two such units were readied by the year's end. By early June 1980, five of these battalions were operational. A second training camp in the Caprivi Strip, code-named *Tiger*, opened its doors in February 1980 to accelerate the build-up. By 1982, FALA had begun to conduct multiple-battalion operations, and had activated brigade headquarters. That same year, Cuban intelligence assessed FALA to have sixteen semi-regular battalions and three brigade headquarters. By 1983, FALA was



**Table 10: Known FALA Commands and Units, mid-1983<sup>24</sup>**

Designation	Notes
1st Strategic Front 'We're Coming Back' ( <i>Estamos a Voltar</i> )	3 Brigade HQs, in Cuando Cubango and Moxico provinces
2nd Strategic Front 'People's Frustration' ( <i>Frustração de Povo</i> )	1 Brigade HQ, in Benguela, South Kwanza and part of Huambo province
3rd Strategic Front 'Black Hope' ( <i>Esperança Negra</i> )	Lunda North and South provinces
Central Front	parts of Huila and Huambo provinces
Southern Front	Quando Cubango, Cunene and part of Huila provinces
12th Brigade	est. 1982, attached to the 1st Strategic Front
21st Brigade	est. 1982, attached to the 1st Strategic Front
34th Brigade	est. 1982, attached to the 2nd Strategic Front
53rd Brigade	est. 1982, attached to the 1st Strategic Front
7th Semi-Regular Battalion	
14th Semi-Regular Battalion	
17th Semi-Regular Battalion	
24th Semi-Regular Battalion	
26th Semi-Regular Battalion	
66th Semi-Regular Battalion	
90th Semi-Regular Battalion	
111th Semi-Regular Battalion	
117th Semi-Regular Battalion	
210th Semi-Regular Battalion	est. mid-1981
275th Semi-Regular Battalion	est. mid-1981
327th Semi-Regular Battalion	
333rd Semi-Regular Battalion	
360th Semi-Regular Battalion	est. mid-1981
369th Semi-Regular Battalion	
415th Semi-Regular Battalion	
423rd Semi-Regular Battalion	
517th Semi-Regular Battalion	
618th Semi-Regular Battalion	

known to have at least 20 such battalions and four brigade headquarters. All the semi-regular forces were defined as “strategic”, and were controlled by the FALA Strategic Operational Command. The number of military regions had also continued to increase and had reached 22 by 1979. By 1981, Savimbi was claiming to control 20,000 armed and trained fighters.<sup>21</sup>

During its Fifth Congress in 1982, UNITA reorganised its territorial commands.<sup>22</sup> The Eastern, Northern and Western Fronts became strategic Fronts, emphasising the movement's



Much of the heavy weaponry captured by the SADF during its forays into southern Angola eventually ended up in the hands of UNITA. Correspondingly, the insurgency even operated a handful of T-34/85 tanks. However, these saw next to no combat due to the lack of fuel and the means of transporting them to distant battlefields. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A still from a video providing a close-up of a FALA-operated T-34/85. As well as the obvious turret number, the tank appears to have received UNITA's star with red rising sun and the black cock, as well as some sort of tactical insignia in the form of a triangle. Notable is the silhouette of a BRDM-2 reconnaissance car in the rear. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Supplies – of arms, ammunition, food and clothing – were always one of the biggest issues for the FALA and thus UNITA. The situation improved only with the 'return' of South Africans to the scene of the Angolan War, in 1978. This group of FN/FAL- and M16A1-armed insurgents was photographed shortly after unloading the truck visible in the rear. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

ambitions. Furthermore, a first batch of 180 guerrillas began to receive dedicated reconnaissance training in South West Africa at the end of 1979. In 1982, FALA had activated its first long range reconnaissance and sabotage units, which acted as Special Forces, known as the *Grupos de BATE* (*Brigada de Acção Técnica de Explosivos*; BATE). These were platoon-sized groups including 45 men and named after the movement's fallen heroes. Dedicated teams trained in MANPADS-use or anti-aircraft gunnery – the later equipped with 12.7mm and 14.5mm calibre machine guns and 20mm and 23mm automatic cannon – answered to a single command. One of the strongest FALA unit remained Savimbi's own personal

guard. Garrisoned in Jamba, in 1981 it had at least 500 troops lavishly equipped with support weapons.<sup>23</sup>

Once its rear-bases were secured in Jamba, FALA progressively created its own camps to train its semi-regular soldiers. New recruits were between 17 and 19 years-old on average, and followed three months basic training. Six-month specialized courses became available to train various specialists and later on, UNITA claimed to have created schools to train its own junior officers. On the other hand, training of guerrilla fighters continued to be decentralised and much less thorough, with at best half the time dedicated to semi-regulars. UNITA also gradually developed an effective cottage industry, also concentrated in Jamba, to support its armed wing. Several workshops produced 2,000 uniforms per month, as well as leather boots and other items to equip its soldiers. There were also workshops dedicated to the maintenance and refurbishment of weapons and vehicles. With time, UNITA's mechanics proved capable of manufacturing specific spare parts or components that were hard to procure. Hence, by the mid-1980s, Jamba had become the beating heart of UNITA's military machinery.<sup>25</sup>

During the early-1980s, the movement's radio network linked its Jamba communication centre and the fronts, military regions and large combat units. This network included more than 900 radio sets, including state-of-the-art

Racal sets. Of course, and although most of the traffic was coded, it was unavoidable that the sheer existence of such a sophisticated communication infrastructure became an invaluable source of information for Angolan and Cuban intelligence, as Operation *Crystal* made clear. This worked both ways however, and UNITA did also acquire its own SIGINT capabilities and by 1981 a main interception and deciphering centre was also located in Jamba, under Lieutenant-Colonel Renato Mateus. The later was mostly equipped with Soviet-made communication equipment and used to intercept enemy radio traffic. By then, UNITA was claiming to eavesdrop and decipher FAPLA's radio traffic at will – the latter was often non-





In comparison to about 100 BRDM-2s rushed from the USSR to Angola in late 1975, very little is known about the number of BTR-40 armoured scout cars delivered and their service with the FAPLA. There are less than a handful of photographs showing them, and most of these indicate that they were left in their overall green colour. This vehicle was an exception in so far as it received a camouflage pattern in sand (or mud) colour and an SGMB 7.62mm light machine gun. The type seem to have been used for similar purposes to the BRDM-2s; i.e. for scouting and patrolling areas threatened by the FALA. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



The BTR-60PB (and diverse sub-variants) constituted the primary APC of Angolan and Cuban motorised infantry formations, starting with 3 Bon IM and the 9th BRIM of late 1975. Along Cuban lines, 7 were usually assigned to each of the three companies of each motorized infantry battalion, while the HQ-section operated one more. While all were painted in olive green overall, and Angolan examples are not known to have regularly worn any kind of markings, FAR-operated BTR-60s used to wear a kind of 'turret number', usually applied on the cover of one of hatches on the side of the superstructure. These were apparently based on the assignment of the vehicle to a specific platoon and company: 041 might have indicated the assignment to the HQ-element. (Artwork by David Boquelet)



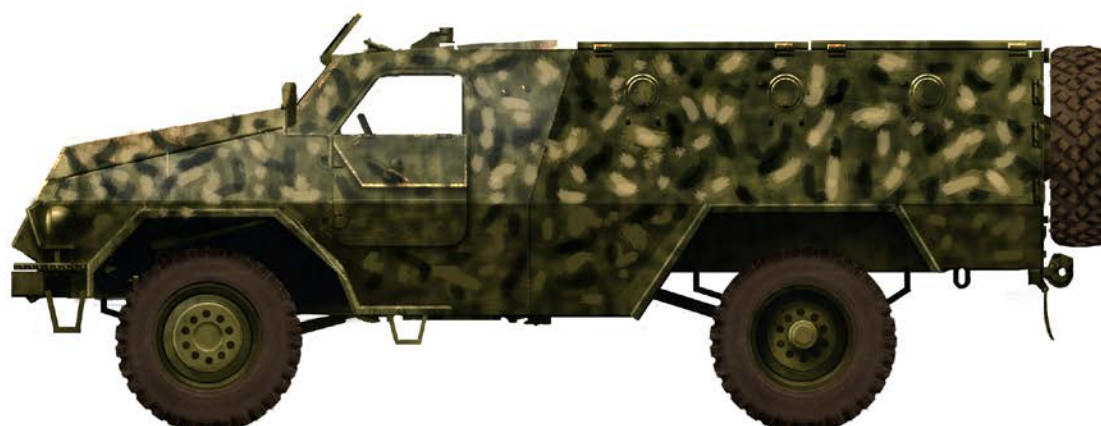
The BTR-152 remained the most widely used APC in Angola of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although assigned only to 'conventional' motorized infantry units and thus rarely seeing combat against the FALA/UNITA, it was highly popular for the capability to inflate or deflate tyres, thus adapting to the local terrain. The most widespread variant was the 'vanilla' BTR-152 APC, with an open-topped fighting compartment. This was frequently armed with a SGMB 7.62mm light machine gun, but sometimes with the 14.5mm DShK heavy machine gun, as shown inset here. As far as is known, none received any camouflage pattern by 1983, and continued serving in the original olive green overall. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



The most powerful fighting vehicle operated by FAR units in Angola of the late 1970s was the T-54/55 MBT. Although foremost operated by Cuban-staffed RIMs – each of which operated a battalion of 22 such MBTs – all were Angolan-owned. As usual, they were left in olive green overall, and FAR-operated examples are known to have worn turret numbers (applied in same fonts as those on Cuban-operated BTR-60s): both the meaning of the turret number and the identity of the operating unit remain unknown. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



Organized in October 1982, the *Compañía Venceremos* ('We will Overcome Company') was the first Cuban unit established with the special purpose of escorting supply convoys through insurgent-infested parts of Angola. The unit was staffed by 8 officers and 116 other ranks, and equipped with multiple ZPU-4s, one AGS-17 grenade launcher, six flamethrowers and up to 20 vehicles. In addition to BTR-60s, the latter included armoured Ural-4320 trucks of Soviet origin, one of which is illustrated here. From written descriptions it appears that they received a double layer of armour plate on their sides, roof, back, and driver's cabin: in-between of the armour plates was filled with sand, for improved protection. Although convoy-escort was one of the most dangerous of duties for Cuban troops in Angola, such modified Urals became highly popular, and several dozen were modified in this fashion during the 1980s. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



The Wallid Qadr was one of the first armoured vehicles to enter series production in Egypt (and thus in all of Africa). Although resembling a mix of the BTR-40 and BTR-152, it was based on the West German UNIMOG 4x4 chassis with a superstructure of indigenous construction and containing many improvements based on Egyptian combat experiences. Between 900 and 1,000 were manufactured by the Qadr Works in Hellwan, owned by the Arab Organisation for Industrialisation, AOI. While Egypt was not an official ally of the MPLA, the latter acquired a few dozen Wallids in late 1975 or in 1976, and the FAPLA deployed them for patrolling and reconnaissance purposes. Only black and white photographs of Angolan Wallids are available, mostly indicating that they were originally painted in olive green overall, over which a random camouflage pattern in yellow (or sand) and black was applied. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)





FALA/UNITA-operated T-34s seem to have retained their olive green overall colour, but received a very interesting set of markings – including a turret number, the yellow star with the rising sun and the black cock (UNITA's symbology) on the hull side, and diverse others. Sadly, precise details about exactly which unit operated T-34/85s with such markings remain unknown. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



Similarly to FALA/UNITA's T-34s, the few BRDM-2s operated by the insurgency also received diverse markings. Very little is known about these, but there seem to be at least two types: one including the badge of UNITA, applied in white only (as shown here), the other perhaps slightly more complex. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



In comparison, BRDM-2s operated by the FAPLA and the FAR remained almost free of any kind of national markings or other insignia: they were usually left painted in dark green or olive green overall, and also seem to have carried very little of the crew's kit externally. (Artwork by David Bocquelet)



By 1982-1983, the FAPA/DAA operated up to 20 SE.316B Alouette IIIs of different origin. In addition to the survivors of the 6 original helicopters found at Luanda IAP in 1975, it also acquired a batch of Romanian-manufactured IAR.316Bs. The origins of this example remain unclear: when sighted in a parade commemorating the establishment of the Angolan air force, in January 1978, it was painted in forest green overall and wore the new roundel of the FAPA/DAA on the rear fuselage, as well as a big black serial H202 on the boom. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

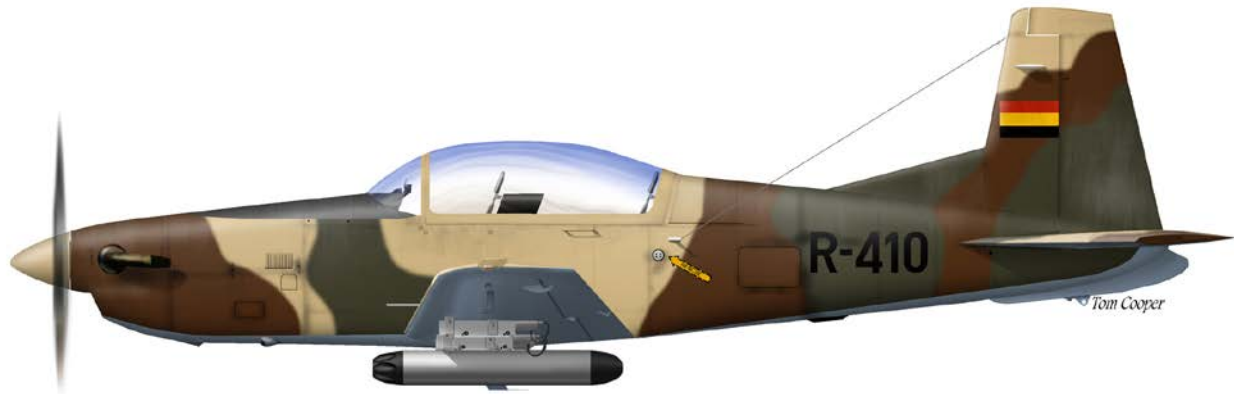


The Mi-8 serial number H10 belonged to the second batch acquired by Angola. It arrived in the country sometime in 1975 or 1976, and saw heavy involvement in COIN operations against the FALA/UNITA at least until 1983. As usual, the helicopter was painted in dark green on top surfaces and sides, with the bottom of the fuselage and the boom in light admiralty grey (BS381C/388). Contrary to the batch H01 – H04, its serial appears to have been applied in white, and slightly further forward. Notable is a roundel applied in a rather 'non-standard' format, with a very wide red field. Usual armament consisted of four UB-16-57 pods for unguided 57mm rockets. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



As well as a miscellany of light aircraft left behind by the Portuguese, the third major utility type in service with the FAPA/DAA of the early 1980s was a handful of Antonov An-2 biplanes. Other than that they flew not only transport missions but also reconnaissance sorties, very little is known about them or their looks, except that they appear to have been painted in the same colours the Mi-8s (including dark green on top surfaces and sides, and light admiralty grey on undersurfaces), and wore serials such as R-34, R-102, R-104, R-108 and R-109, applied in black on the rear fuselage. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)

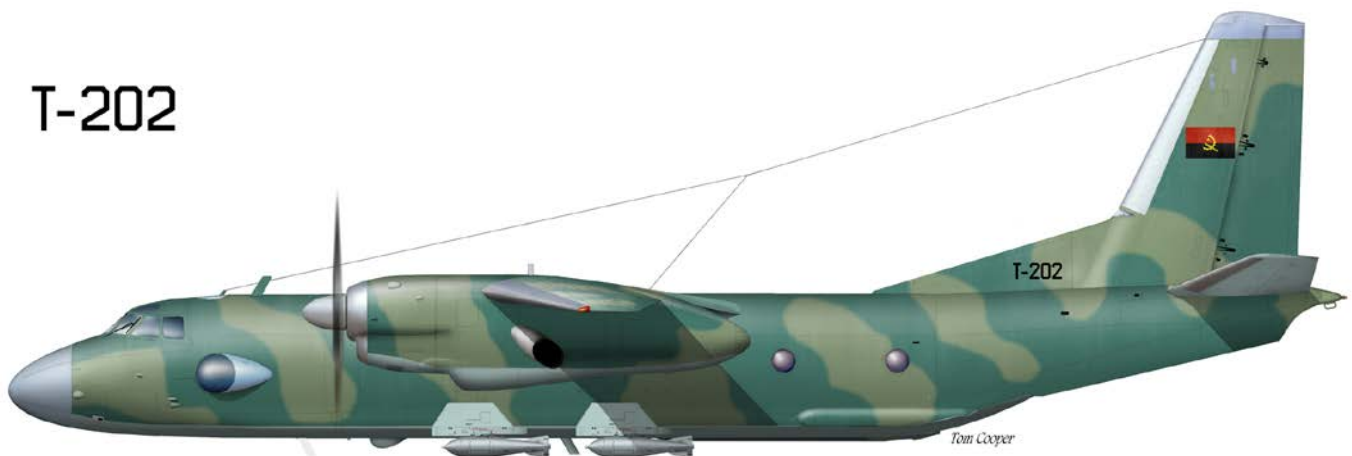




In 1982-1983, Angola acquired the first batch of 12 Pilatus PC-7 basic trainers, followed by 8, and then another 6 additional examples at a later date. All were painted in the same camouflage pattern as PC-7s sold to Iraq around the same time, consisting of *Brun Café* (similar to BS381C/388 Beige), *Brun Noisette* (similar to BS381C/350 Dark Earth), and *Gris Vert Fonce* (similar to BS381C/641 Dark Green) on top surfaces and sides. Undersurfaces were probably painted in a colour similar to Celomer 1625 *Gris Bleu Moyen Clair* (light blue grey). Although designed and sold to Angola as basic and advanced trainers, they were serials dedicated to reconnaissance aircraft (in the range R-401 up to at least R-424, with serials R-405 and R-407 each known as being used twice), and were usually armed with Matra F2 pods for 68mm unguided rockets. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



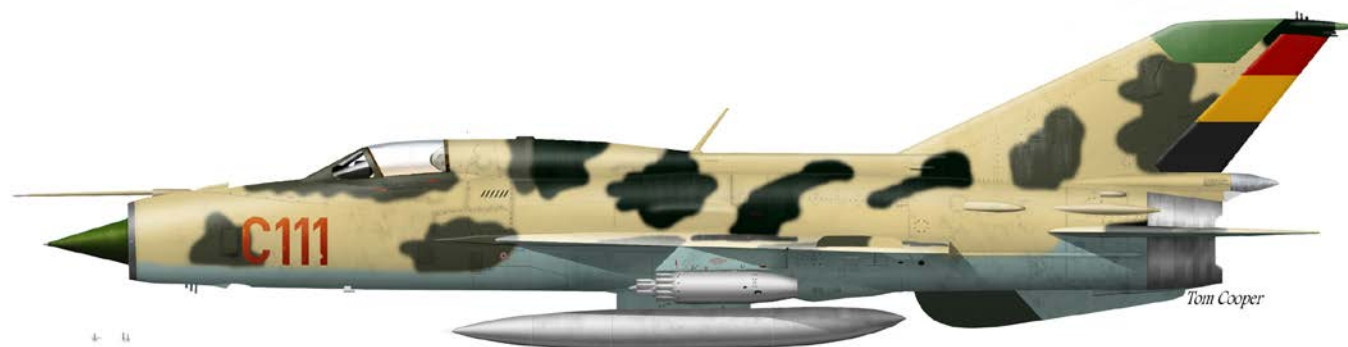
By 1981, most of the surviving MiG-15UTIs (of which there were three), and MiG-17Fs of the FAPA/DAA had received a camouflage pattern consisting of beige (BS381C/388) and black-green (similar to BS381C/337 very dark drab) on top surfaces and sides. Undersides were left in light admiralty grey. The type was usually armed with UB-16-57 pods or bombs of up to 250kg installed on underwing hardpoints instead of drop tanks. The inability to carry a mix of drop tanks and bombs or rockets was also the main problem of the MiG-17F in Angola: it limited their combat radius to about 150 kilometres. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



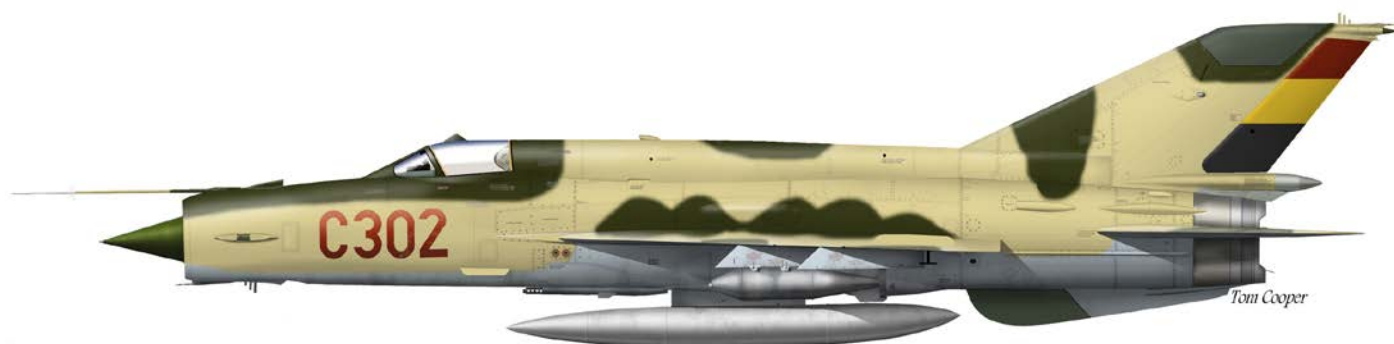
The most important medium transport type in service with the FAPA/DAA of the 1980s was the Antonov An-26B, up to 50 of which are known to have been acquired during that decade. While some wore civilian livery and civilian registrations, others received a camouflage pattern in a Soviet-manufactured colour reminiscent of grey-green (BS381C/283) and emerald green (BS381C/228) on top surfaces and sides – which differed from aircraft to aircraft. Radomes were either painted in camouflage grey (BS381C/626, as in this artwork), or in black, while all leading edges on the wing and horizontal and vertical stabilisers were left in aluminium colour. The serial – always applied in black on the base of the fin – was usually repeated on the top of the right wing surface. This is a reconstruction of the An-26B serial T-202 lost during the Battle of Cangamba. Nearly all of the camouflaged examples were equipped with under-fuselage bomb racks, and were frequently used as bombers armed with up to four FAB-500M-62s, as illustrated here. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



As of 1983, the survivors of the first 12 MiG-21MFs acquired by Angola in 1981 were still in service, though primarily used as fighter-bombers. The same was true for this example, which survived a landing mishap in 1976, but was repaired by Cuban technicians at Luanda IAP. For ground attack, they were usually equipped with UB-16-57 pods for 57mm S-5 unguided rockets or FAB-250M-62 bombs. The centreline pylon was nearly always used to carry a 800-litre drop tank: most of these, as well as most of the 400-litre drop tanks were painted in the same beige (BS381C/388) and dark green (BS381C/641) as the aircraft carrying them. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



In 1981, in the course of preparations for Operation *Misión Olivo*, the FAPA/DAA was bolstered through the acquisition of the first out of a sizeable batch of MiG-21PFMs. All of these were second-hand aircraft from surplus stocks of the Soviet air force: they were overhauled prior to delivery and received very diverse camouflage patterns, usually consisting of beige and olive or dark green, but often 'enhanced' through the addition of large splotches of black-green, black, and perhaps dark brown too. This is a reconstruction of the example with serial number C111, which is known to have been flown by Cuban pilots during the Battle of Cangamba. It is shown as armed with UB-16-57 pods and carrying an 800-litre drop tank under the centreline. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)



By 1983, the first batch of MiG-21bis acquired by Angola were also in operation, and several of them saw action during the Battle of Cangamba. All wore the standard camouflage pattern consisting of beige (BS381C/388) and olive drab (BS381C/298) on top surfaces and sides, and light admiral grey (BS381C/697) on undersurfaces. Their armament for ground-attack was essentially the same as that of the MiG-17Fs, MiG-21MFs and MiG-21PFMs, and usually consisted of UB-16-57 pods for unguided rockets or FAB-250M-62 bombs. This example is shown with an RBK-250 CBU under the inboard pylon, a small number of which are known to have been deployed during the Battle of Cangamba. For combat air patrols, this variant was usually armed with either two or four R-13M (ASCC/NATO-code 'AA-2 Atoll') air-to-air missiles. (Artwork by Tom Cooper)





One of the four original Mi-8s brought by the Cubans to Angola in 1975 ended its career after the main rotor severed the boom in the course of a hard manoeuvre. As of the late 1970s and early 1980s all the Mil Mi-8s operated in the markings of the FAPA/DAA were still exclusively staffed by Cuban crews. Notable is the crudely applied 'roundel' on the rear fuselage and armament consisting of UB-16-57 pods for unguided rockets. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



While officially 'following the Marxist ideology', the MPLA government in Luanda repeatedly attempted to establish friendly relations with Washington – to no avail. With the original core of FAPA/DAA and TAAG pilots appreciating the qualities of Western aircraft, Luanda not only found and bought Boeing 737 airliners: in 1977–1979, it acquired two Lockheed L-100-30s – including the example visible on this photograph, while wearing the livery of Angola Air Charter and registration D2-FAG – and two C-130H Hercules transports. All saw intensive use in support of military operations by the FAR and the FAPLA. Re-registered as D2-THB in 1982, this Hercules continued serving in Angola until shot down by a FALA/UNITA-fired MANPAD, on 5 January 1990, shortly after take-off from Menongue Air Base. (Albert Grandolini Collection)





Map of Angola featuring the most important air bases and airports. (Map by Tom Cooper)



encrypted anyway – but to have difficulties to crack much more sophisticated FAR codes. Some of the military regions also had a radio specifically dedicated to monitoring government frequencies.<sup>26</sup>

The ever-increasing size of the semi-regular forces went parallel with a similar build-up of the movement logistical infrastructure. While by mid-1980, it was operating a fleet of roughly 50 trucks, this number increased to as many as 300 two years later. These were mostly captured vehicles of Soviet, Polish or Czech design and UNITA workshops converted them to use diesel – easily available from South West Africa – instead of much harder to obtain petrol. Trucks were invaluable assets and each of these had a dedicated crew of three men, with one driver, one co-driver and a mechanic.

It was extremely difficult to keep the vehicles operational as spares were hard to find, while the bush took its toll, with the average life expectancy of a truck being 10 months. These vehicles travelled along a network of trails; causeways, or paths reinforced with logs were also built to allow the vehicles to cross the floodplains and rivers. When the rivers were too wide or too deep, the trucks were disassembled, their parts carried aboard barges across the river, and then reassembled on the other bank. The process could take as much as eight days for a single Ural truck, but only one for a Land Rover or similar cross-country vehicle. Because they were natural logistic chock points, anti-aircraft units defended the most crucial of these crossing sites.



A group of 'semi-regular' FALA combatants showing the usual mix of civilian and military fatigues and armament (including AKM and FN/FAL assault rifles, and an RPK machine gun) of widely varying origin – together with the 'obligatory' transistor-radio. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

By 1984, the movement claimed to have 20,000 miles of tracks carved into the bush, including the so-called 'Savimbi trail'. The trucks could thus carry their supplies to bases well inside Angola. However, the last leg of the trip sometimes had to be made by supply columns travelling on foot from transit points connected to the trail network in order to reach bases or units active deep in Angola or in contested areas. Indeed, only air transport could provide supplies at short notice or in large quantities deep inside Angola. Thus, the movement operated several airstrips in Angolan territory, and also increasingly benefited from SAAF airdrops. South African transport aircraft flew 25 such missions in 1979, 66 in 1981 and 84 in 1983.<sup>27</sup>

## 4

# TRADING BLOWS

Mid-way through the process of reinforcing itself and with the SADF willing to commit its forces in Angola to support its operations, FALA went on the offensive during the second half of 1979. By then, its struggle had a dual nature. In most of the regions where the movement was present, its actions remained primarily small-scale guerrilla attacks, such as ambushes, mine laying and sabotage operations. UNITA was also gradually expanding its zone of influence northward, intending to settle new military regions in central Angola. Meanwhile, by mid-1979, during a series of joint meetings between UNITA and SADF leaders, plans were drawn up for an increase in the pace of operations in the areas bordering South West Africa. As a result, FALA would launch large, semi-conventional offensives in the Cuando Cubango province and the east of the Cunene province, corresponding to FAPLA's MR 5.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 11: Brigades of MR 5, FAPLA, 1980<sup>2</sup>**

Unit	HQ
1st BrIM	Dirico
2nd BrIM	Cahama
11th BrI	Ondjiva
16th BrI	Cuito Cuanavale
19th BrI	Xangongo
54th BrIL	Mpupa
67th BrIL	Cuvelai

The SADF was to support these by providing FALA with small special forces units and mortar teams. Furthermore, South African

units were to increase the intensity of their cross-border raids – or ‘externals’ – against PLAN bases in the rest of the Cunene province, thus creating a vacuum that would be filled by UNITA.

While it was only by the end of 1979 that the FALA felt strong enough to attempt to keep captured localities – instead of temporarily seizing them, destroying their infrastructures and quickly retreating – the FAPLA invariably attempted to recapture these. Thus, during the following years, the war in Cuando Cubango and eastern Cunene became very much a succession of FALA offensives during the rainy season between March and June, and FAPLA counter-offensives during the dry season between June and October, when large motorized columns could move on the roads. Ironically, it was the opposite in Cunene – where the PLAN launched its infiltration campaigns during the rainy season to make the most of the dense foliage and abundance of water, while SADF launched its large cross-border raids during the dry season.<sup>3</sup>

UNITA's first large operation in 1979 came on 21 March when three guerrilla companies with 600 men in total, under Lt.Col Kanjimi, took the small town of Xamavera with the support of SADF recce commando teams. On 19 April 1979, a South African mortar team from 32nd Battalion forced the garrison of Mpupa to withdraw after a fierce barrage, thus allowing FALA guerrillas to seize the locality without fighting. Meanwhile, on 17 April, the first operational FALA semi-regular battalion had overwhelmed the town of Cuangar in 15 minutes. Calai, another border town, came next on 19 May 1979, when a FALA battalion supported by four South African Recces' commando teams and a 32nd Battalion mortar team took it. Thus, in two months, four localities in the Cuando Cubango province – including two crucial border towns – had fallen.

However, the FAPLA reacted as it had done in 1977 and 1978: with the Operations *Cuangar* and *Toma de la Frontera*, respectively. Although lacking troops, the HQ MR 5 ordered the 16th BrI (HQ Cuito Cuanavale) and the 67th BrIL (HQ Caiundo) to move detachments toward the border. Delayed by a few small FALA ambushes, these retook Cuangar in mid-July 1979. After lengthy

preparations, the 67th BrIL's detachment resumed its advance and retook Calai on 24 September 1979. Unsurprisingly, in October, while the dry season was ending, FALA initiated a new attack against Mavinga, garrisoned by a single battalion of the 67th BrIL. This time, FALA concentrated its two available semi-regular battalions with 1,200 men, led by Savimbi himself. The assault was launched around midnight on 3 October and soon turned into a fierce nocturnal battle. By early morning, FALA intercepted radio traffic between the garrison and the FAPA/DAA detachment in Cuito Cuanavale and learned that none of the three Cuban operated Mi-8 based there were operational, and were thus unavailable to launch airstrikes. Accordingly, the attack resumed in the afternoon and the overwhelmed FAPLA battalion retreated. The insurgents stripped the town of everything that was useful, destroyed what it could not carry away and withdrew, letting FAPLA forces reoccupy the place a few days later. Thus, by year's end, government forces were still in control of the main towns in Cuando Cubango province, but in control of no useful infrastructure, and the increased use of battalion-seized forces by the insurgents was a worrying sign.<sup>4</sup>

FALA resumed its offensive operations again in early 1980. Contrary to earlier assaults, this time it intended to hold the places it conquered. Hence, between 11 and 13 February, FALA forces – supported by the now usual SADF reconnaissance-commando and mortar teams attacked Calai and Dirico. By then, FAPLA had decided to reinforce its beleaguered units struggling in the region. Accordingly, a newly raised unit, the 60th BrIL was sent to the area. Following a days-long march, it established its headquarters in Savate, and relieved the over-extended 67th BrIL by garrisoning Calai, Cuangar and Dirico with its own battalions.<sup>5</sup>

These reinforcements were badly needed; the FALA/SADF conglomerate was planning to capture the towns of Cuangar, Calai, Mpupa, Rivungo, Rito and Savate, all before 30 June 1980. The first step of the offensive came on 14 April 1980 in the morning when one FALA battalion supported by a 32nd Battalion mortar platoon attacked Cuangar and occupied it. The 60th BrIL battalion defending the town offered only weak resistance and retreated after

having lost 12 KIA. The unit left behind its support weapons – including several ZPUs, one SA-7, and several vehicles – and reported having faced three FALA battalions supported by mortars, artillery and SAAF airstrikes.<sup>6</sup>

### Savate Slaughterhouse<sup>7</sup>

The next target was Savate. However, at this stage no FALA battalions were available and the SADF decided to engage the bulk of 32nd Battalion to seize the town, for what was to be the first direct and large-scale engagement between FAPLA and the SADF since Operation *Savannah*. Also known as the ‘Buffalo’ Battalion, this unit offered ‘plausible deniability’ because it was composed of Portuguese-speaking Angolan soldiers and NCOs, led by



A newly-established FAPLA unit moving in a column of trucks out of Luanda, underway for one of the battlefields in south-eastern Angola of 1980. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



SADF officers, and thus could be easily disguised as 'UNITA'. Originally created as an ELNA battalion, and known as Combat Group Bravo during *Savannah*, the unit had withdrawn to South West Africa where it was expanded and reorganised. By 1980, it had become an elite light infantry force extremely effective in COIN operations, and had already conducted number of cross-border raids against PLAN bases in Angola.

However, the Operation 'Tiro-Tiro' – as the attack against Savate was code-named – proved much

bloodier than expected. South African intelligence had assessed that the town was held only by the 60th BrIL HQ, support elements, and one infantry battalion at most – while air reconnaissance failed to detect the presence of weapons systems such as Grad-1P rocket launchers or ZPU heavy machine guns. Unknown to the South Africans, the brigade's two other battalions had vacated their respective garrisons in Dirico and Calai and also concentrated in Savate. For the Angolans, this was to prove both a curse and a blessing: on one hand, the 60th Brigade was much stronger at full strength, but on the other, its main base was overcrowded and there were not enough fighting positions or entrenchments by far for the available troops. Furthermore, only a half-circle trench line reinforced with firing positions and bunkers protected Savate. That was more than enough to repulse FALA guerrillas or at most one or two semi-regular battalions, but nothing else. Furthermore, the Brigade's CO Captain Eusébio de Brito Texeira – an experienced and Portuguese-trained officer – had been recently transferred to another location, and its replacement was a youngster of 23 years, Lieutenant Daniel Rufino, who had been trained as a political commissar.

In any case, by sheer ill luck, the South African reconnaissance teams sent to Savate before the assault were delayed and thus unable to correct the faulty intelligence assessment. Hence, when on the morning of 21 May 1980, infantry of the 32nd Battalion advanced after an intensive mortar bombardment on the target, they met with unexpectedly fierce resistance, as described by one of the Charlie Company officers:

Around 09:00 the mortar bombardment started and we started our attack on the transport park north of the airfield. We advanced in an extended line. We heard the bombs exploding to our south. We advanced for about 100 to 150 meters when all hell broke loose on us! I first thought that we were in the killing ground of an ambush, as trees and plants around us were simply cut down by 14.5-millimetre bullets. [...] It became clear to me that we would never win the firefight because the enemy weapons were



The crew of a FAPLA B-10 recoilless gun during training. Along with mortars, this was one of the primary support weapon of every BrIL: six were captured intact during the combined assault by FALA and SADF on Savate on 21 May 1980. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

much more numerous and dangerous than ours. I ordered a ceasefire and instructed everybody to move back to a safe area.

Despite massive casualties inflicted by the mortars shells while landing in their overcrowded trenches, 60th BrIL's soldiers held their positions, returning effective and disciplined fire for several hours. It was only once their support weapons were neutralized one after the other – foremost by a lucky hit from the South African mortars on the Grad-1P battery – that FAPLA began to give ground, retreating toward the vehicle park area where they organized a convoy and began to withdraw from Savate. While moving away from the base, the convoy met with the South African ambush teams that covered the road precisely for such an eventuality. To make matters worse, and despite initial restrictions intended to keep the whole operation clandestine, an Aerospatiale SE.316 Alouette III gunship had appeared over the battlefield and began to strafe the retreating trucks with its 20mm cannon, inflicting severe casualties.

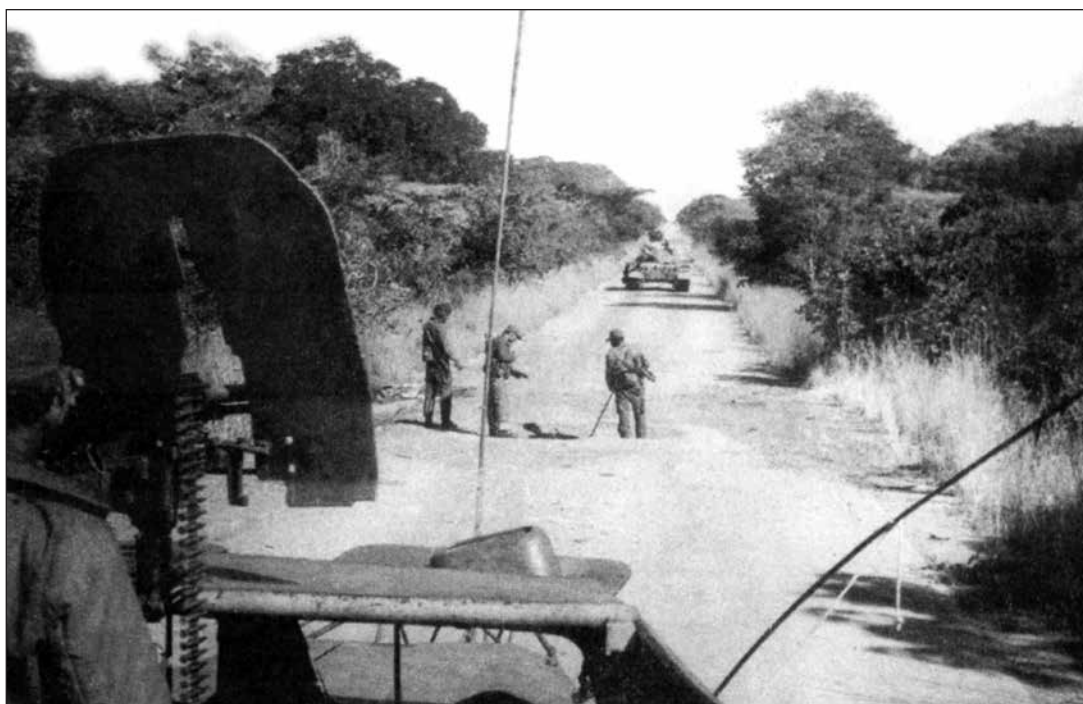
By the time the battle was over, the 60th BrIL suffered 558 casualties, including the wounded and missing in action. The South Africans also captured a large booty of various equipment, including 458 AK-47, 12 light machine guns, 6 B-10 recoilless rifles, 5 Grad-1P launchers, and 7 trucks. Another 45 vehicles and a single BRDM-2 were destroyed during the engagement. However, Savate was also the SADF's bloodiest engagement in years: the 32nd Battalion lost 15 KIA and 26 WIA that day.

### Reciprocating

Savate was not the end of the slugging match. On 8 June 1981, FALA mobilized two battalions to attack Luengue. On this occasion, it deployed its Moroccan-trained mortar teams, commandos and FAOs for the first time. Hence, the commandos conducted a thorough reconnaissance of enemy positions. While the infantry assault was also – and as usual – preceded by a mortar barrage, it benefited from the presence of the FAO. Each time a strongpoint blocked the advance, the observers guided precise mortar fire onto it – something unheard of so far among FALA forces, which could



The FAPLA crew of a Mercedes-Benz Unimog multipurpose 4x4 truck converted into a so-called 'technical' through the installation of an automatic cannon on the rear deck. Popular for their robustness and reliability, Unimogs were in widespread use by nearly all of the parties involved, and many were captured and re-captured in multiple clashes, time and again. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Every movement by the FAR and the FAPLA along the dirt-roads and tracks of southern and eastern Angola was made problematic by the large number of mines sown by the FALA. Here a group of Cuban troops is inspecting a crater left over by a mine detonated by the T-54/55 equipped with the KMT-5 mine roller kit, ahead of them. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

previously only use their indirect fire weapons for 'general area' bombardment (hence the presence of SADF mortar teams during the previous battles). The FAPLA battalion defending the place was overwhelmed and withdrew 30 minutes after the beginning of the engagement. Next came Rivungo, that was assaulted a few weeks later by three FALA battalions, with similar results; the defending FAPLA battalion withdrew toward Mavinga.<sup>8</sup>

By early August, the MR 5 of the FAPLA had recovered from this series of heavy blows and planned for its own counter-offensive to regain Savate. On 16 August, Mi-8 helicopters dropped a battalion near the town: this took UNITA by surprise and

government troops secured the place without encountering any resistance. However, the motorized column underway from Caiundo fell into a massive ambush laid by two FALA battalions on 20 August and had to turn back, leaving 38 destroyed vehicles and 30 soldiers killed. With the relief force thus defeated, the HQ MR 5 had no choice but to send helicopters again to evacuate the isolated battalion.<sup>9</sup>

To add insult to injury, another defeat followed on 19 September, when FALA launched its own large-scale assault against Mavinga, defended by the 55th BrIL (another newly raised unit). To do that, the insurgents had massed four battalions and several mortar batteries, with 2,500 men in total. The assault first targeted the FAPLA brigade HQ on the northern side of the town, and then the airstrip. After a brief bout of fighting during which it lost 26 soldiers KIA, the garrison gave up and withdrew, leaving behind its support weapons and large stocks of equipment and ammunition. Even then, around 200 guerrillas ambushed the retreating column around 20 kilometres from the town. With the fall of Savate, Dirico, Calai, Cuangar, and Mavinga, UNITA was carving itself a large area totally under its control, as an obvious stepping stone for expanding northwards. Hence, on 30 September the MR 5 of the FAPLA unleashed a new counter-offensive to retake the lost ground, especially so as it had been reinforced by the 18th BrI from the MR 4. The

16th and 18th BrI, and the 53th BrIL as well as the 92nd Batallón de Intervención – a crack unit – were mobilized for the operation named the First Extraordinary Congress of the MPLA-PT (*Primer Congreso Extraordinario del MPLA-PT*). Despite all being badly understrength, these units conducted a textbook mobile warfare campaign during the month of October, combining multipronged advances with vertical envelopments, and thus disrupting FALA's ability to attempt to mass its forces and oppose them. By 1 November 1980, Mavinga, Luengue, Rivungo and Savate were retaken – but FALA forces remained unscathed as they simply withdrew to avoid the onslaught.<sup>10</sup>





T-54/55s not only gulped immense amounts of fuel, but were relatively scarce – just like their KMT-5 mine roller kits. Thus, the mass of mines found along diverse roads and dirt tracks in Angola had to be removed by engineers. These four engineers were photographed while working to open the road for the convoy waiting behind them. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

### Deadly Year

With the change from dry to rainy seasons, the wheel turned in the other direction again. In January 1981, the FALA reoccupied Savate and Mpupa, thus clearing the way for another assault on Mavinga. This came on 13 March 1981, and – just like in September the previous year – the defending brigade withdrew after having suffered heavy losses in men and equipment. Determined to recapture the town, the HQ MR 5 deployed the 18th BrI, which left Cuito Cuanavale on 16 May 1981. The unit formed a large motorized convoy, 1,300 troops and a few armoured vehicles. From 21 May onward, its advance began to be delayed by rear-guard actions from a company of insurgents. Nevertheless, the FAPLA reached a crossing point on the Lomba River, around 20 kilometres north of Mavinga, on 25 May – when it was ambushed by a single battalion of the FALA and forced to stop. In this fashion the insurgents bought the time necessary to concentrate four additional semi-regular battalions, and some artillery and mortars – about 4,000 combatants in total. The 18th BrI's CO soon realized that the noose was tightening around his command and that any attempt to break through toward Mavinga was hopeless, but the HQ MR 5 forbade any retreat. The brigade thus remained static and concentrated on establishing a defence perimeter – playing right into the hands of FALA, which gained another few days to finish its build-up and plan its onslaught. The latter came on 28 May: the resistance of the 18th BrI broke down in a matter of hours. As its remnants fell back towards toward

Cuito Cuanavale, the unit collapsed and the survivors became easy targets not only for insurgent ambushes, but for FALA battalions that followed in hot pursuit. Constantly harassed, a mere 157 of the doomed brigade made it back to Cuito Cuanavale.

The demise of the 18th BrI shocked the whole of FAPLA and the government in Luanda: for the first time ever, the insurgents proved capable of successfully defending an important facility. Until that point in time, the High Command FAPLA tended to focus on the SADF – which was perceived as the major enemy – while underestimating the threat of the UNITA.<sup>11</sup>

### Protea

By mid-1981, South African externals targeting PLAN bases in the Cunene province were repeatedly frustrated by the contemporary rules of engagement, which restricted the involved forces from engaging local FAPLA garrisons. Well aware of these restrictions, the PLAN began seeking refuge by deploying its units near Angolan positions whenever it felt threatened by another South African offensive. While some FAPLA commanders – foremost such as Major Alfonso María, CO 11th BrI in N'Giva – reached a 'gentleman's agreement' with its counterpart in the 32nd Battalion not to interfere with actions against the PLAN, other Angolan commanders were much more aggressive and they frequently harassed SADF units operating close to their positions. Therefore, the South Africans decided to go 'all-out' into the southern Cunene province with a much larger force than any since 1976. This time, their intention was not only to eliminate the PLAN forces, but also destroy any FAPLA units based there.

The plan for this operation – code-named *Protea* – triggered a bigger mobilisation in South Africa than anything since 1945. By late August 1981, the SADF deployed nearly 4,000 officers and other ranks organized into three task forces. The strongest amongst these was the Task Force Alpha: a main, conventional 'fist', consisting of battle groups 10, 20, 30, 40, and Combat Team Mamba, mostly drawn from the 61st Mechanized Battalion Group and the 32nd Battalion, but also elements of the 44th Parachute Brigade. This task force wielded tremendous firepower thanks to its brand-new Ratel 20 IFVs and Ratel 90 and Eland armoured cars. It was supported by several artillery troops, several 81mm and 120mm mortar platoons, a battery of Valkiri 127mm MRLs (deployed in combat for the first time), and the Gharra unmanned aerial vehicles used for reconnaissance purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Soviet intelligence had expected the SADF onslaught for months, and thus the three Angolan regular units defending southern Cunene had been instructed to prepare accordingly – as of March 1981. The most powerful of these was the 2nd BrIM, defending Cahama. This unit, led by Major Farrusco, was widely considered as a crack force with excellent morale among its troops. Reinforced by a full motorised battalion of the PLAN, the 2nd BrIM prepared extensive fortified positions, as recalled by Sergey Vladimirovich Shlarinenko, a Soviet translator attached to the HQ MR 5 and then also the Angolan brigade:

He has the most active, experienced and clever commander compared to the two other commanders. He was a white Portuguese guy, ex-commando [...]. So it was easy for us to organise combat training, exercises, practice fire, etc., and we considered the brigade as the best prepared for combat action [...]. We had planned the 360-degree defence keeping in consideration possible roads, cutting, and even ground obstacles. On the main threat directions three-level artillery assaults were planned [...].

We organised very good camouflaging and all that possibly could be covered[...]. Our artillery had various reserve and false positions, even those false ones could be used for combat fire when needed [...]. Then we had prepared tank counter-attacks cross trenches on different angles of attack, and the rest of the possible threat directions, we simply mined [...] Anti-tank fire was prepared on all significant roads with planned changes of position and so on.<sup>13</sup>

The other two FAPLA units, the 11th BrI (CO Major Alfonso Maria) and the 19th BrI (CO Captain Kibety) – which defended Mongua and N’Giva (former) and Xangongo and Peu-Peu (latter) – had also prepared extensive defensive systems patterned according to Soviet doctrine. While less powerful than the 2nd BrIM, the two infantry brigades still had plenty of artillery and one T-34/85 company attached each. However, each of these had dispatched one infantry battalion to defend Mongua and Peu-Peu respectively. Furthermore,



A scene from one of the forward operations bases (FOBs) of the SAAF in northern South West Africa during Operation *Protea*: visible as tightly packed on the tarmac are a total of 8 Mirage IICZs and IIRZs, 10 Mirage F.1AZ/CZs, at least two C-130 Hercules transports, and one or two of lighter aircraft. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A soldier of the SADF carrying away one of about 100 SA-7 missiles captured during Operation *Protea*. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

their commanders, as well as the Soviet advisors, had anticipated an enemy advance from the south, and prepared their defensive positions accordingly – thus underestimating the SADF doctrine of mobile warfare. Arguably, the most decisive flaw in the planning of the MR 5 was the lack of adequate anti-aircraft defences. The three brigades could only rely on a combination of light flak like ZU-23s, a few 20mm M-1955s, and ZPU-1 and ZPU-4 14.5mm heavy machine guns. They also had Strela-teams to protect themselves. However, regardless how numerous these were, the SAAF had by then devised special tactics to counter such opposition – notably by reducing the exposure of its aircraft to the bare minimum. This proved critical, because the SAAF mobilized 142 aircraft for the operation, including 65 combat and reconnaissance jet aircraft.<sup>14</sup> On the other side, the Cubans and Angolans could have mustered at best two dozen MiG-17 and MiG-21 fighters at the time, and they lacked the range to operate effectively over Southern Cunene Province from the Lubango and Menongue ABs anyway. Indeed,

Pedro Benga Lima ‘Foguetão’, the then head of the MR 5 and an old hand in the struggle against the Portuguese, did not harbour any illusions: ‘The South Africans were much stronger. To challenge them in the air would have been suicidal.’<sup>15</sup>

Even so, the SAAF took no chances and opened this operation by launching a series of air strikes on the two radar sites covering the area, in Cahama and Chibemba, on 23 August. During the following night, SADF troops penetrated into Angola. The result of the operation, which ended on 6 September 1981, was very much a total victory. On 24 August, Task Force Alpha outflanked Xangongo to assault from the north with two of its battle groups, while the third repulsed a probe from the battalion garrisoning Peu-Peu, counter-attacked, and seized this locality too. The 19th BrI in Xangongo was then overrun in a matter of a few hours. Task Force Alpha then moved east, seized Mongua, and assaulted N’Giva on 27 August with three battle groups converging on the town from three different directions. In both Xangongo and N’Giva, the ground attacks followed in the wake of massive airstrikes involving as many as 30 fighters and bombers. Indeed, the SAAF flew a total of 1,112 sorties during *Protea*, dropping 333 tons of bombs and firing 1,774 unguided rockets and 18 AS.30 missiles. Its sudden attacks, associated with



the deployment of massive firepower, simply overwhelmed both 11th & 19th BrI, breaking the morale of their troops – who tended to simply abandon their positions and heavy equipment, and retreat.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the South Africans suffered very limited losses, including 14 killed and 61 wounded in action. Angolan AAA did shoot down a single Alouette III, while one Mirage III was damaged by a Strela. However, on the ground the South Africans lost one Ratel 20 IFV destroyed. In turn, the South African intelligence assessed that *Protea* resulted in the death of at least 831 PLAN and FAPLA combatants and 13 Soviet advisors; 46 were captured – including one Soviet instructor.<sup>17</sup>

It was only thanks to Major Farrusco that the casualties were not even heavier: wisely enough, the CO of 2nd BrIM outright refused an order from the HQ MR 5 to launch a limited counter-attack southward to retrieve abandoned BM-21s, thus saving his command from the fate of the Cuban GT-2 at Cassinga, two years earlier. Left on its own, the SADF thus collected an enormous amount of equipment, including a dozen T-34/85 and PT-76 tanks, four BRDM-2s, 25 ZiS-3 76mm guns, 46 ZU-23, ZPU and M55 AAA guns, nearly 100 SA-7 missiles, thousands of small arms, 240 vehicles and 250 tons of ammunition. A major part of these, including the T-34 tanks, were later donated to UNITA. Another consequence of *Protea* was that the South Africans maintained a permanent military presence in Southern Cunene during the following years.<sup>18</sup>

### Birth of the ATS

*Protea* was a close call for the MMCA too. A FAR tank battalion protected Chibemba when the SAAF hit the nearby radar station on 23 August 1981. Furthermore, Cuban officers initially misinterpreted the South African offensive as a full-scale invasion of Angola and placed RIM Lubango on combat alert – expecting it to have to fight off the SADF during the following days. Unsurprisingly, the Cubans decided to reinforce their Namibe-Menongue line: by the end of December 1981, two new regiments – the RIM Cubango and RIM Menongue – had appeared in southern Angola. Two other regiments followed in 1982: RIM Caala – located near Huambo and acting as an operational reserve – and RIM Moçâmedes. Unsurprisingly, the size of the MMCA contingent increased significantly: by 1982, it

grew from around 20,000 to 27,000 officers and other ranks.<sup>19</sup>

In turn, the growing number of units in southern Angola triggered the creation of a new intermediate command: in late July 1982, the Southern Group (*Agrupación de Tropas del Sur*, ATS) came into being, with General de División Leopoldo Cintras Frías as its first commander. The units assigned to this command were better equipped than any other: they included seven new tank battalions equipped with T-54/55s and at least five artillery and anti-aircraft groups attached to various of the RiMs. The reinforcements continued arriving and thus by early 1983 the Cubans had about 30,000 troops in Angola, including the advisors attached to FAPLA units. The bulk were still assigned to the ATS, but other combat units continued to be present in Cabinda (at least one RIM), Luanda (one RIM), Malanje, Quibala (one GT), and Luso. Of course, the shoot down of one Cuban-flown MiG-21 by the SAAF during



The collection of FAPLA and PLAN/SWAPO tanks (T-34/85s, foreground), armoured scout cars (BRDM-2, centre left), and dozens of trucks captured during Operation *Protea*, in August 1981. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A still from a video showing two additional vehicles of the PLAN/SWAPO captured intact during Operation *Protea*: the jeep-like vehicle in the foreground is an old Soviet-built GAZ-67, manufactured in 1940s, while the truck in the rear appears to have been a Polish-made Star 266 (Angola acquired 2,785 of these 6x6 vehicles between 1977 and 1981). (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Cuban tankers assigned to one of the newly-established T-54-equipped tank companies of the ATS in 1982. (Albert Grandolini collection)

Operation *Daisy*, as well as the next major clash in Cunene Province between SADF and FAPLA in December 1983 (during Operation *Askari*) only enticed the Cubans to further reinforce the ATS.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 12: Known FAR units of the ATS, 1982**

Unit
RIM Lubango
RIM Matala
RIM Huambo
RIM Caala
RIM Cubango
RIM Menongue
RIM Moçâmedes

### Misión Olivo

The Cuban build-up was not only related to conventional units. By early 1981, the Angolan government had concluded that its forces were losing ground against UNITA and requested the Cubans to provide advisors again to its counter-insurgency units. The Cubans readily approved and the first instructors arrived in Angola on 28 May 1981. The whole operation was a massive undertaking in its own right, placed under command of General de División Raúl Menéndez Tomashevich, and was baptized Operation, or *Misión, Olivo* (Olive, after the FAR magazine *Verde Olivo*). During the following months, 1,005 men – including 413 officers – arrived in Angola. The bulk of these were to act as advisors. They were distributed among FAPLA units starting from mid-July 1982. Meanwhile, another 117 men were assigned to three different specialised schools dedicated to train Angolan recruits in counterinsurgency warfare. Following an Angolan request, the mission's size had already been further increased at an earlier point in time and thus by November 1981 it counted 2,706 officers and other ranks. These troops were used to 'corset' 5 regional commands (one of these was the HQ

in charge of securing the Benguela railway), and to appoint 136 man strong teams – including one 36 man team per infantry battalion with three advisors and a support and security platoon – in 16 light infantry brigades as well as the 44th BrIN.

Because of its size, by the end of 1982 the mission had exhausted the pool of Cuban officers and NCOs with experience in LCB operations, regardless if gained in Cuba of the 1960s, or with the MMCA in Angola before 1979. Correspondingly, a new school – the *Centro de Enseñanza Militar Especial Funda* – was established around 30 kilometres from Luanda and began to train a first batch of future Cuban advisors on 21 March 1983. Altogether, the school, led by Colonel Ramón Márquez Silva, trained 489 men by 1989.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, the High Command FAPLA and its Soviet advisors went to great lengths

to reconstitute the battered brigades of the MR 5. Indeed, on 10 September 1981, only half of 11th and 19th BrI's troops were accounted for, while the two units had lost virtually all their equipment. The 18th BrI had been also badly mauled by UNITA in May. However, these efforts provided only limited results. By mid-1982, both the 11th and 19th BrI (meanwhile relocated to Cuvelai and Mulando, respectively) still had only around 1,200 troops each, while the 3rd BrI, which had moved from Negage to Chiange the previous year, had only 900 officers and other ranks. By May 1982, even the 2nd BrIM was down to about 55% of its nominal strength – although the moral of its soldiers was assessed as 'high'. Notwithstanding how unsuccessful these were, the attempts to resurrect FAPLA's ability to face a new SADF onslaught south of the ATS defensive line were enough to incense the Cubans.<sup>22</sup>

### Never-ending Strategic Controversy

Indeed, Havana still advocated that FAPLA should concentrate all its efforts on the counter-insurgency struggle against UNITA while the MMCA was deterring the South Africans from penetrating deep inside Angola. Furthermore, the Cubans assessed that any FAPLA attempt to meet SADF forces head-on south of the Namibe-Menongue line was futile because of the SAAF's aerial supremacy. Moreover, southern parts of Cunene and Cuando Cubango provinces were of extremely limited economic value. At first, it appeared that this Cuban strategy was to be adopted – at last. In October 1981, a meeting between the MMCA, FAPLA and the Soviet military mission leadership resulted in the adoption of a joint paper proclaiming that the priority would go to the fight against UNITA. However, this proved anything but long lasting: in early February 1982, the Soviet military mission informed its Cuban counterpart that Moscow had shifted its priorities back to the strengthening of FAPLA conventional forces – thus reemphasising the South Africans as the main threat. Actually, both the Angolans and Cubans agreed that the Soviet emphasis on regular units and conventional

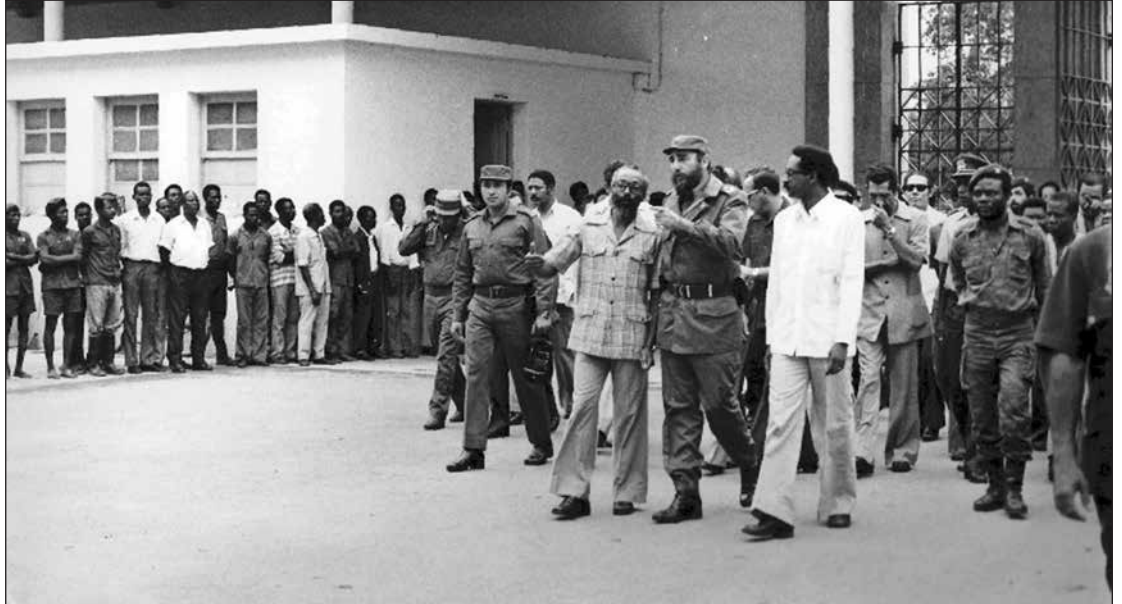


operations was as a result of their lack of awareness about COIN warfare. Lúcio Lara, a MPLA central committee member, even described during a visit to Cuba in December 1981 the advice given by the Soviets as:

not relevant to the real situation in Angola. Their officers have no experience in guerrilla warfare. They see everything through a conventional prism<sup>23</sup>

One might expect that this kind of commentary from Angolan officials would have pleased their Cuban allies. However, the majority of the latter were actually in agreement with Soviets: to them, the ability to defend Angola's sovereignty with their own forces was a matter of national prestige. The overall result was that the SADF versus UNITA strategic debate shifted as a pendulum for the rest of the II Angolan War, and was never clearly settled: the Cuban frustration only continued to grow, to the point that in 1983 Fidel Castro wrote to Dos Santos that:

For years, you have adopted the wrong strategy: you have concentrated your efforts on preparing the regular brigades of



Officially at least, relations between Havana and Luanda just couldn't be any more cordial, and the MPLA never left out the opportunity to express its gratitude for Fidel Castro's and Cuban internationalism and anti-colonialism. Under the surface, the Cuban leadership was heavily critical of the Angolan leadership's conduct of the war. Of course, nothing of this was to be seen during Castro's visits in Luanda, like this one in March 1977. (Albert Grandolini)

the FAPLA to repel a foreign attack, but these troops did not participate in the war against bandits. [...] Eighty percent of your cadres, men, weapons and supplies have been dedicated to the regular brigades...In general, the Angolan units that have waged this war [author's note; counter-insurgency units] have lacked men, equipment, supplies, and adequate leaders [...]. For a long time we have been insisting in vain that all the brigades of the FAPLA, regular brigades and light brigades,[...] must concentrate on the war against the bandits.<sup>24</sup>

## 5

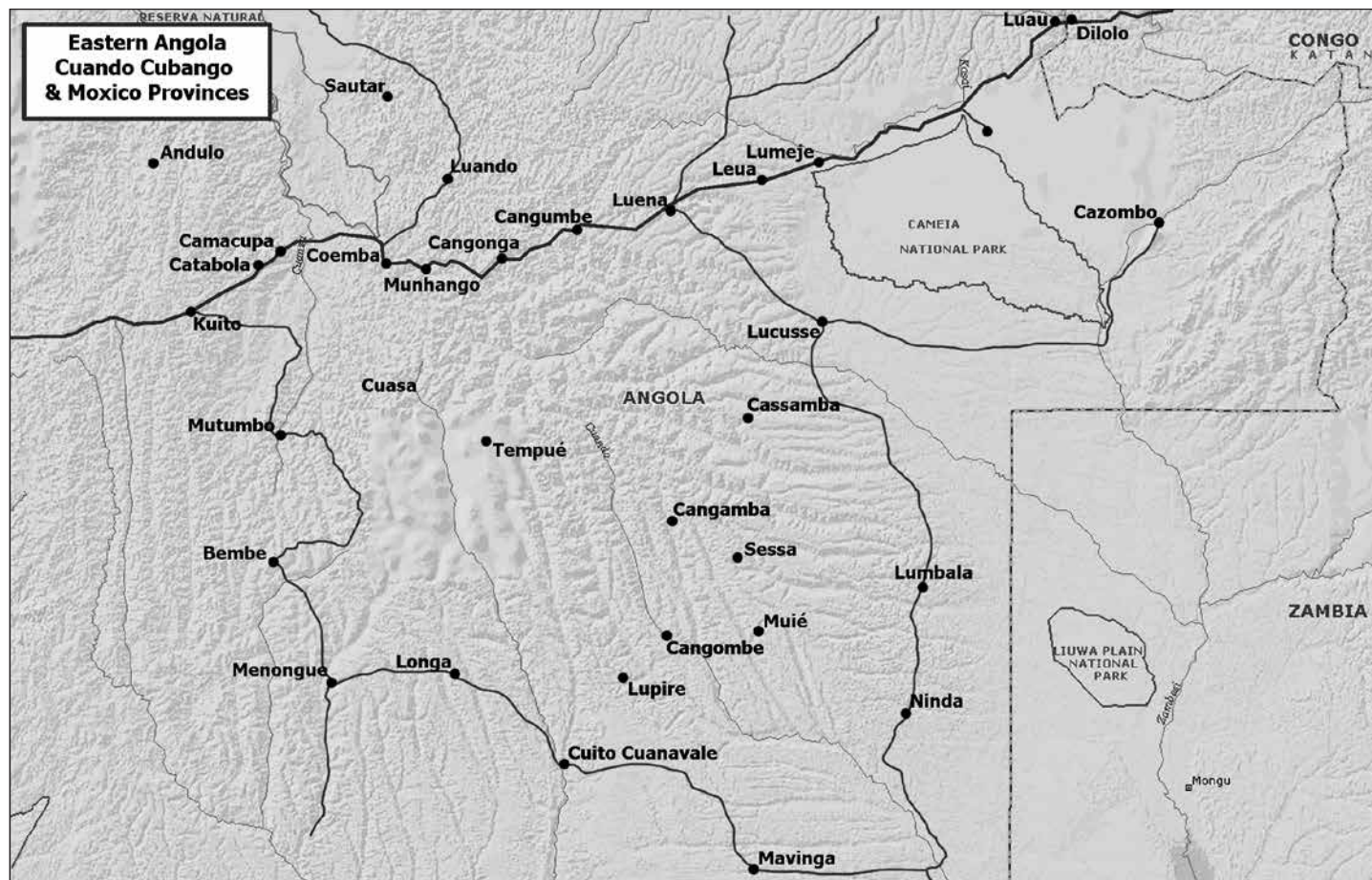
## CENTRAL ANGOLA BURNING

Once it had secured its grip over the Cuando Cubango province, the FALA continued to build-up its semi-regular forces with the intention to advance toward Moxico province. Simultaneously, it intensified its operations in the Bié, Benguela, Huíla, Huambo, Cuanza South and Malenjé provinces and by the end of 1982, was infiltrating political activists and guerrillas into Uíge province in order to build up new bases. In these, the movement continued to wage a classic guerrilla warfare, relying mainly on its local military regions and their local and regional guerrilla forces to harass government forces and target the economic and communication infrastructure. While less spectacular than the comparatively big battles fought in south-eastern Angola, the evolution of the conflict in central Angola was crucial. The Angolan highlands were the breadbasket of the country and much more densely populated than southern and south-eastern Angola. The result of the disruption of normal economic life – which was already suffering badly from the government's mismanagement and endemic corruption – was unsurprising; the central highlands ceased to provide any food supply to the other regions. By the end of 1981 the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was feeding around 60,000 people there – 120,000 fewer than one year later. Furthermore,

since at least 1979, UNITA's underground cells repeatedly launched bomb attacks against civilian or economic targets – especially power plants and refineries – in cities such as Luanda, Huambo or Lobito.

The insurgents also increasingly targeted foreign workers, taking them as hostages to dissuade much-needed experts from working in Angola while the negotiations for their release kept the movement under the spotlight of the international media. Indeed, UNITA's campaign to sabotage the national economy and control the population was so direct that bomb attacks or hostage taking targeted even the ICRC – until the organisation suspended its operations in Angola in October 1982.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, strategic communication arteries crossed central Angola. Thus, it is unsurprising that since 1976, one of UNITA's most favoured targets became the Benguela Railway (*Caminho de Ferro de Benguela*, CFB), transiting Angola from west to east, and – to a lesser extent – the Namibe-Menongue railway, economically less crucial but ideally located for supplying the Cuban forces of the ATS.



A map of Cuando Cubango and Moxico provinces showing the eastern section of the Benguela Railway. (Map by Tom Cooper)



Once a convoy ran into an ambush, the crews debussed and took cover – either at the side of the road, or underneath their vehicles, as in this case. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

### The Benguela Railway

With its length of around 1,100 kilometres and its 96 major bridges, the CFB was indeed an extremely vulnerable target, and both the Angolans and the Cubans came to the conclusion that a dedicated command was needed to deal with the ever-increasing number of attacks targeting it. By early May 1977, a Cuban company escorting an engineer party attempting to repair a bridge over the Cuiva River had to repulse several large-scale assaults by insurgents. On 5 April 1978, under the *Plan Ferro* (Iron Plan), a dedicated headquarters was activated to control four territorial battalions and

one intervention battalion dedicated to CFB security. This was only a first step as other troops were diverted to this purpose, and to protect the Nambic-Menongue railway too. Furthermore, FAR troops also took part in the effort until 1979, when they were withdrawn. By the end of 1978, there were still 57 platoon-sized outposts – including 15 manned with mixed FAR/FAPLA detachments and four with FAR-only detachments – along the railway between Benguela and Luau. Furthermore, all the convoys were escorted. One self-propelled wagon equipped

with a radio was moving two or three kilometres ahead of the train to give early warning against enemy ambushes, while the convoys themselves included BTR armoured vehicles placed on wagons.<sup>2</sup>

These measures proved anything but sufficient to reverse the trend. 16 trains were derailed during 1978 alone, while on average, three insurgent-related incidents per week on average, such as mine planting, took place along the railway that year, and this grew to an average of one per day in 1979. This soon made any normal exploitation impossible, and from May 1979 to February 1980, a mere 133 wagons loaded in Zaire successfully reached Lobito,





A BTR-152 of the FAR leading a lengthy convoy of supply vehicles. With supplies being the essence of modern warfare, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of 'skirmishes' fought during the II Angolan War were related to the movement of such columns: the FALA/UNITA campaign against the Benguela Railway in the 1978-191 period especially caused dozens of convoy-related clashes. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

while by March 1979, only two out of 24 diesel locomotives were operational. By then, outposts protected all the major bridges, but these remained worthwhile targets because blowing one up could potentially stop any traffic for months. In December 1978, around 300 guerrillas attacked a mixed Angolan-Cuban platoon protecting a bridge over the Cuive River. The latter survived only with air support provided by helicopters and the timely arrival of reinforcements. In August 1979, a full FALA semi-regular battalion overwhelmed a poorly armed FAPLA detachment protecting the 60-meter long Luavava Bridge and destroyed it.<sup>3</sup>

In the end of October 1981, the railway defensive system was reshuffled and expanded again. An Independent Defence Command located in Lobito controlled four defence zones corresponding to Benguela, Huambo, Bié and Moxico. In turn, these four zones and the CFB Defence Command controlled 17 infantry battalions. Despite forces tripling in size since 1978, and the return of Cuban advisors in 1981, reopening of the Benguela railway over its full length for any significant duration remained an impossible task virtually until the end of the war. Indeed, the bulk of the infantry battalions were concentrated to protect the segment of the railway connecting Lobito and Huambo. Things were no better on the Namibe-Menongue line from 1982 on: as far as is known, on average only one heavily escorted train reached Menongue every

three months.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 13: CFB Defence Command, mid-1982<sup>5</sup>**

Unit	Notes
Independent Defence Command	Lobito
360th Infantry Battalion	
361st Infantry Battalion	
1st Defence Zone	Benguela Area, HQ in Cubal
362nd Infantry Battalion	
363rd Infantry Battalion	
364th Infantry Battalion	
365th Infantry Battalion	
366th Infantry Battalion	
2nd Defence Zone	Huambo Area, HQ in Caala
367th Infantry Battalion	
368th Infantry Battalion	
369th Infantry Battalion	
3rd Defence Zone	Bié area, HQ in Kwanza
370th Infantry Battalion	
371st Infantry Battalion	
372nd Infantry Battalion	
373rd Infantry Battalion	
4th Defence Zone	Moxico area, HQ in Lumege
374th Infantry Battalion	
375th Infantry Battalion	
376th Infantry Battalion	

### FAPLA's Seventh Anniversary

It was not long before the Cuban advisors of the Olive Mission became involved in battle. On 14 August, a detachment of 52 men from the 57th BrIL, including seven Cubans, ran into an ambush on the Matala-Dondo road. One Angolan soldier was killed, another wounded, as well as three Cubans. Two weeks later, the Cubans got their revenge: their SIGINT intercepted and deciphered UNITA radio traffic and learned about a planned weapon airdrop for the 26 August in a spot along the Tombole River. The 53th BrIL was airlifted to Caiundo, from where it moved toward the enemy drop zone on 26 August. Two days later, the FAPLA troops swiftly scattered the insurgent retrieving party, and captured the 38 tonnes of weapons just dropped by a SAAF transport aircraft. Cuban radio intercepts continued to pay handsome dividends. On 28 August too, encrypted messages indicated that UNITA's 11th Military Region was preparing simultaneous attacks against several bridges on the Chitombe-Menongue road. As a result, the 48th BrIL conducted a sweep in the area, disrupted the enemy preparations and captured several supply dumps.

Meanwhile, on 10 and 11 July 1981, a joint-conference between Angolan, Cuban and Soviet high-ranking officers decided to launch a massive and two-staged operation, named the FAPLA's Seventh Anniversary (*VII Aniversario de las FAPLA*) – against insurgents throughout the whole country, including Cabinda. The first stage was to take place mainly in south-eastern and southern Angola, while the second stage was to target insurgents active in eastern and northern

Angola (including the Cabinda enclave). However, Operation *Protea* and the fact that MR 5 needed much more time than anticipated to ready their exhausted combat units, delayed the operation: it began only in late August. Unsurprisingly, the months-long offensive had meagre results, except in central Angola.

The most successful attack took place in the Huíla and Huambo provinces, where six brigades had been concentrated, including the 45th and 48th BrIL. There, radio intercepts between 7 and 12 September uncovered a FALA operation intending to destroy the Gove Dam and its power plant. The 45th BrIL was deployed in time to force the FALA guerrilla company designated for the attack to withdraw. During the following weeks, the FAPLA forces in the two provinces multiplied the raids and sweeps against the insurgent bases and successfully forced the guerrillas to scatter into small groups or to vacate the area and withdraw toward the Cuando-Cubango province. Refurbished at last, two brigades, including the 57th BrIL, began to target insurgent bases in the Cunene province as well, while the 32nd BrIL was doing the same in the Moxico province. In Cuando Cubango province, from 29 August on, both the 53rd and 60th BrIL initiated their own sweep against FALA's 63rd Military Region in the area of Cuchi, but the operation failed because the 53rd BrIL was delayed by fuel shortages, thus allowing the insurgents to avoid encirclement. Furthermore, there were by far too few forces to really advance into the southern Cunene province, as by mid-1981 the UNITA was assessed by Cuban intelligence to have as many as 10,000 combatants, including a dozen semi-regular battalions, in these areas. Furthermore, the situation worsened as the guerrillas from the other provinces began retreating into this area because of the FAPLA pressure applied elsewhere. In the end, the months long *VII Aniversario de las FAPLA* operation provided only limited results. Indeed, during the whole operation, the FAPLA command in charge of the provinces of Huambo, Bié, Benguela and Cuanza South provinces was responsible for roughly 65% of the losses assessed to have been inflicted to UNITA.<sup>6</sup>

### Respuesta

The series of successes against UNITA insurgents in central Angola between August and September 1981 proved anything other than long lasting. On 3 November 1981, one FAPA Mi-8 was shot down 20 kilometres from Chitembo, in the Bié province. The following day, an Mi-8 flying with four Alouette IIIs was shot down in the same area, making the presence of a large FALA concentration obvious. Indeed, on 6 November, two strong insurgent forces attacked simultaneously two bridges on Chitembo-Menongue road, defended by one company each of 48th BrIL and 13th BrI for the first and one company of the 48th BrIL for the second. As a result, both 36th and 48th BrIL rushed to the area to relieve the beleaguered detachments. Supported by airstrikes from MiG-17s based in Menongue, the two brigades repulsed the guerrillas after a series of fierce fights during which they lost 30 KIA, including a single Cuban soldier, and 29 WIA while inflicting a similar number of casualties upon the insurgents.<sup>7</sup>

FAR regular units were not normally engaged in counter-insurgency operations against UNITA, except when the insurgents directly targeted either them or Cuban civilian advisers active in the vicinity, while by the end of 1982, the latter began to be armed and trained to face any unforeseen insurgent attack. Usually, the Cuban regular regiments were free to react without specific orders within a predetermined area of responsibility. However, from time to time, the Cubans reacted to such incidents by launching much larger, so-called *Respuesta* (Repulse) operations, consisting of sweeping areas harbouring guerrilla units directly threatening their units or their lines of communications. Such an occasion took place on 23 October 1981, when FALA guerrillas ambushed a detachment of RIM Matala, killing one FAR soldier and wounding two others. As a result, the MMCA headquarters ordered a large scale combined FAR-FAPLA operation, and mobilized elements from the RIM Huambo, Lubango and Matala, while FAPLA dispatched both the 57th and 67th BrIL. These units swept the Cubango-Kipungo road between 4 and 11 November 1981, but did not meet with any



A line of FAPLA light infantry advance over a clearing in the bush of south-eastern Angola in 1982. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



significant resistance as the insurgents simply withdrew from the area.<sup>8</sup>

Several weeks after, two small Cuban detachments were attacked again in the vicinity of Matala, triggering a similar reaction. Under Operation *Baire*, four FAR battalions contributed by the RIM Cubango, Matala, Huambo and Lubango, reinforced by parts of the 57th and 67th BrIL and ODP formations swept Huilé province, roughly corresponding to UNITA's 19th military region, between February and April 1982.

Meanwhile, another sweep targeted UNITA's 63rd Military Region. The latter, which was covering the north-west of Cuando Cumbango province, was the main channel through which UNITA was supplying its forces operating in the Huambo and Bié provinces. Accordingly, 63rd Military Region was assessed to control as many as 2,000 fighters, who were also harassing the roads linking Menongue with western and northern Angola. The operation began on 31 January 1982 and involved elements from as many as eight FAPLA light infantry brigades, as well as ODP detachments, supported by FAPA MiG-17s and helicopters. On this occasion, the light brigades operated by advancing with two battalions to the front, in order to cover as much ground as possible during their advance, while their third battalion followed behind to act as a reserve. The tactic proved relatively successful; during the following six weeks, these forces claimed to have killed 335 enemy combatants and successfully cleared Menongue's surroundings. Perhaps more importantly, FAPLA forces displaced 3,163 peasants formerly controlled by UNITA, thus complicating 63rd Military Region's logistics in the long run. As usual, UNITA's SIGINT had intercepted and deciphered FAPLA's radio communications. Accordingly, all the important leaders vacated the targeted area well in advance.<sup>9</sup>

### Ploughing the sea

For the government forces, the problem remained the same; they could clear specific areas from time to time, but had nowhere near the numbers and the effectives necessary to hold them, thus letting the insurgents resettle there. Indeed, by mid-1982, the chronically under-manned 15 light infantry brigades in existence had just 11,400 men available in total. They were thus virtually all at half-strength on average. In essence, the FAPLA and FAR counter-insurgency campaign remained akin to ploughing the sea. Unsurprisingly, UNITA's dual strategy was reasserted during the movement's 5th Congress, in July 1982: the advance toward the Moxico province was to continue while the pressure was to be increased in the areas corresponding to its Central and Northern Fronts.<sup>10</sup> Between August and September 1982, FALA dispatched the 360th and 517th Semi-Regular battalions from Cuando Cubango province to reinforce its 25th and 50th Military Regions, which covered the Quibala-Huambo – Benguela-Sumbe area. At least another battalion, the 369th, followed these during the subsequent months. In September, the 517th Battalion made its presence felt by launching a full-scale



A frequent sight on many of roads in central and south-eastern Angola of 1983: a completely burned-out vehicle – in this case a truck towing a ZiS-3 gun, probably blown up by a hit upon the load of ammunition it usually carried. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

attack on one train travelling near Huambo. In turn, the increase in insurgent attacks in central Angola triggered the reorganisation of FAPLA's military region system; and led to the creation of the Military Regions 6, 7, and 8 in the period between late 1982 – early 1983, followed by 9 and 10 thereafter.<sup>11</sup>

It was not long before Angolan and Cuban intelligence detected the enemy build up. As a result, the FAPLA High Command planned for a new large-scale operation against UNITA's 25th and 50th Military Regions, and combined the forces of its own MRs 4 and 7: this is how the code-name for this operation came into being: '74'. The enterprise was to include several BrILs, between them the 98th and 166th, and ODP militias, and was supported by three regular infantry battalions of the FAR. One of these was part of the Cuban GT based in Quibala while the RIMs Huambo and Caala contributed one battalion each. Between November 1982 and March 1983, these forces roamed the targeted areas, concentrating first on UNITA's 25th Military Region before turning on the 50th Military Region, and finally, the 93rd Military Region, which was covering the Mussende area. Operation 74 proved successful in diminishing the number of insurgent ambushes and attacks against the roads crossing these areas – but utterly failed to disrupt their ability to launch large-scale operations.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the insurgents managed to concentrate their 517th Battalion in the mountains north-west of Huambo, plus one guerrilla company and one BATE group. After a thorough reconnaissance by the latter, their combined force attacked the Lomaoum Dam, located between Huambo and Lobito, early in the morning of 18 January 1983, and easily overwhelmed the small detachment protecting the facility. Thanks to the forced collaboration of Portuguese technicians captured during the attack, the insurgents placed several demolition charges at the most sensitive points of the dam and its power plant before detonating them: the area downstream was flooded and most of Huambo was left without power supply as a consequence.

At dawn of 12 March 1983, FALA's 369th Battalion and the guerrilla column 'Queen Nzinga', under overall command of Lieutenant-Colonel Alberto Kanhali, attacked and seized the small town of Alto Catumbela, sited on the border between the Benguela and Huambo provinces, killing 17 ODP militiamen in the process. With the town including a large mill and a power plant where dozens of expatriate workers were employed, this attack triggered international outbursts, because the insurgents took captive 86

hostages, including 66 Czechoslovaks and 20 Portuguese. Seven days later, on 19 March, semi-regulars even attacked a Cuban detachment of the GT Quibala, while the latter was moving on the road to Huambo, inflicting severe losses upon it.<sup>13</sup>

### Caribbean Spetsnaz

The headquarters of the MMCA reacted by ordering a counter-insurgency operation code-named *Kwanza 831*. This took place in the Quibala area soon thereafter, and involved the Cuban Special Forces unit, the MMCA's dedicated *Compañía de Exploración de Destino Especial* – a long-range reconnaissance unit led by Rafael Ángel Ramos Fajardo attached to the ATS headquarters.

Composed of soldiers drawn from various FAR special units in Cuba, the company had been used to set ambushes in the vicinity of Cuban garrisons, but also to train similar FAPLA units, as well as to conduct reconnaissance patrols in South African-controlled parts of Cunene province. On such occasions, the Cubans operated in small mixed patrols with either FAPLA or PLAN soldiers, and usually moved only at night and rested during the day. On 5 January 1982, bad luck struck one of these patrols, which included seven Cubans and had been tasked to report upon South African presence in the vicinity of the Cahama – Xangongo road. Apparently, the patrol camped a mere 50 meters from a temporary base of the 32nd Battalion's Delta Company. The patrol radio operator and its leader literally bumped into the enemy soldiers. The first was killed and the second wounded and taken captive, while the rest of the patrol avoided detection and made good its escape, as recalled by Lieutenant Ben Roos, the CO of Delta Company:

The troops slowly started to prepare for the day. One of the troops, taking his rifle and spade with him, went for his early-morning ablutions. [...] The troop walked for a couple of meters but then saw a white soldier in the bush in front of him. The troop was amazed and [...] return to his position to report it. Then Danie and Ribreiro took the flank [...] and walked forward in an extended line. The White Cuban tried to flee, but ran into a [...] tree, but did not drop his rifle. The MAG gunner opened fire and shot him. The other Cuban was shot through both upper

legs. We bandaged his legs, put up a drip and arranged for his evacuation.<sup>14</sup>

Another detachment of the special company arrived at Quibala on 8 April 1983, where it was split into three 11-strong groups. These were to be dropped by helicopter a few kilometres from a major UNITA camp and laid an ambush in order to capture prisoners for further interrogation. Their task was to be eased by MiG-21s and An-26s bombing the enemy camp to generate as much confusion as possible. However, this 'capture' mission turned awry: during their approach to the landing zone, the three Mi-8s were fired upon while flying along the flank of a mountain, and one was hit by fire from a 14.5mm machine gun: one soldier subsequently died. Another Mi-8 turned into the threat and emptied its four UB-32-57 rocket pods into the enemy position, while the MiG-21s that were orbiting above then attacked the same area – to unknown effect. Realizing their mission was compromised, the Cubans decided to abort it.<sup>15</sup>

### Operation Berlin

The next major UNITA attack targeted the town of Mussende. For this operation the FALA concentrated its 360th and 517th Battalions and a guerrilla company – around 1,000 men in total.<sup>16</sup> A single FAPLA battalion, as well as an ODP battalion, defended the place, with 750 men between them. The insurgents launched their attack on 3 July 1983, and successfully broke through the defensive perimeter. The defenders panicked and fled.<sup>17</sup>

What is certain is that a radio operator was among the captured government soldiers. A few days later, the insurgents laid their own trap by forcing their prisoner to request a CASEVAC mission on a pre-determined landing zone where they had dispatched a BATE team wearing FAPLA uniforms. This attempt was only partially successful: on 12 July, two FAPA/DAA helicopters carrying several Angolan and Cuban officers approached the landing zone and one of those landed near the group of disguised insurgents. The first Angolan to leave the helicopter was Captain Jose Joaquim Gaspar, the Chief of Staff of MR 7. He was instantly captured, but the helicopter pilot, who had not shut down the engine, reacted by taking off and distancing safely.<sup>18</sup>

On 5 September 1983, FALA semi-regulars launched another major attack against Calulo, in the Kuanza South province, and this fell on the artillery battalion of PLAN's 1st Mechanized Infantry Brigade, as recalled by Andrew Niikondo (commander of the PLAN brigade's ZiS-3 gun battery):

The attack started when UNITA captured two of our sentries on a small bridge between us and Calulo town. UNITA killed three of our comrades, captured one alive. [...] The enemy attacked us at around 5 o'clock in the morning, shelling with a 60mm mortar. The problem was that we did not have our infantry forces because two battalions



A MiG-21MF (armed with two UB-16-57 pods for unguided rockets) passing low over a motorized column of FAR and FAPLA troops, somewhere in the Quibala area, during Operation *Kwanza 831* in January 1982. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



under Commander Shilunga shoMungandjera and Mbongolo IyaMahata were on a mission in the area of Quisongo, around 40km from us.

Our battalion was simply 'artillery'. We had to put our guns into firing position to return fire. We were equipped with 76mm anti-tank guns, ZPU-1 and ZPU-4 anti-aircraft machine guns, ZU-23mm anti-aircraft guns, and had no 82mm mortars which could have been effective in destroying the enemy manpower in valleys and behind rocks and hillocks. We successfully responded, but the enemy was very strong and had the advantage of the 81mm mortars, firing from high crests. It was difficult for us to destroy them with the 76mm anti-tank guns.<sup>19</sup>

The brigade commander rushed an infantry platoon to reinforce the artillery battalion, but this ran into an ambush and was annihilated. Fortunately for the PLAN artillerymen, FALA fighters then launched a frontal infantry assault, and suffered devastating losses to the direct fire of the ZPUs and ZSUs. After three days of fighting, UNITA withdrew.

Meanwhile, FAPLA and FAR planned a combined offensive to re-establish control over Mussende. Known by the Angolans as '17th September', but dubbed 'Operation Berlin' by the Cubans, the enterprise included the mobilization of all forces from the MRs 4, 7, and 9 of the FAPLA, but also the FAR detachment from GT Quibala, and elements from the Special Reconnaissance Company, and took place from mid-September until 21 November 1983. The Cuban-Angolan troops successfully recaptured Mussende, destroying multiple insurgent bases and killing at least 82 of FALA's combatants, forcing the survivors to withdraw towards the south.<sup>20</sup>

### War of the Caravans

Until 1980, Cuban road convoys supplying the various Cuban garrisons in southern Angola were left virtually undisturbed by UNITA. The insurgents generally avoided taking on Cuban troops, to the point that on some occasions, their ambush parties let Cuban vehicles pass through and waited for FAPLA convoys instead. This had changed by the end of 1982, and was related to the appearance of semi-regular formations in the region. On 20 November 1982, FALA's guerrillas twice attacked a Cuban supply column on the Lobito-Huambo road, destroying three trucks, killing seven FAR soldiers and wounding another 16, while suffering five KIA on their own. On 18 December, another column from the same supply battalion was caught in a well-planned ambush on the Huambo-Menongue road. FALA's fighters simultaneously struck the head and the tail of the convoy, killing four Cuban soldiers and wounding another five. By year's end, it had become obvious that convoy protection needed to be rethought, especially so as the number of UNITA operations targeting road or rail traffic had increased by



A BTR-152 equipped with a device supposed to activate any mines in front of the vehicle, leading a lengthy supply convoy, including a BRDM-2 and about a dozen Ural trucks. Notable is the installation of two light machineguns atop the combat compartment of the BTR in the front, and shields for their gunners. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A platoon of FALA's semi-regulars returning from a patrol with an injured comrade. (Albert Grandolin Collection)

50% between 1981 and 1982.<sup>21</sup>

After all of these experiences, the Cubans decided to set up a dedicated escort unit: the *Compañía Venceremos* ('We will Overcome Company'), established in October 1982. At its full strength, this included a headquarters section, two infantry platoons, one 82mm mortar platoon, and an abundance of support weapons including multiple ZPU-4s, one AGS-17 grenade launcher and six flamethrowers, for a total of 8 officers and 116 troops. The *Compañía Venceremos* also operated several special vehicles, because the BTR-series of APCs proved ill-suited for the task: they were too slow, lacked the technical reliability and – in the case of the BTR-60s – it took much too long for the infantrymen to disembark from them. Instead, the Cubans adapted a number of Ural trucks: these received armour plates designed and prepared in Cuba, and installed on their sides, roof, back and cabins. Their protection was further enhanced through filling the space between two armoured plates with sand. Side-plates received loopholes to enable soldiers to fire out of the fighting compartment. The first batch of such armoured Urals assigned to the *Compañía Venceremos* included 10 'combat' vehicles, one support, and one ambulance vehicle. The unit also received at least one BRDM-2.

From October 1982 to January 1983, the company underwent extensive training, aiming to develop suitable tactics devised to address the shortcomings revealed by an extensive and careful analysis of the ambushes that took place in 1981 and 1982. One of these was the need for two sorts of escort elements, with one for



Another photograph of a – seemingly endless – convoy of supply vehicles of the FAR and the FAPLA, from 1982. With the contemporary Angolan economy providing next to nothing of what the Angolan and Cuban military and security services required, and the available fleet of transport aircraft having rather limited cargo-hauling capacity, effectively everything – from nails and screws, through ‘bullets, beans and gas’, bulldozers and equipment for water exploitation had to be transported over thousands of kilometres in this fashion. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



One of the Ural trucks modified for convoy-escort purposes through the addition of armour plates. Notable is distinct combat compartment at the rear (with the lower hull in v-shape, to decrease the effect of mines), and portholes enabling the embarked infantry to open fire from the compartment without exposing themselves to enemy fire. As is can be seen from the structure atop of this vehicle, it also has a twin 23mm ZU-23 automatic cannon installed inside a turret. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

standardized with 20 to 24 trucks carrying the supplies, organized into elements of five to six vehicles each. The *Compañía Venceremos* was also split into three detachments positioned in the head, centre and tail of the column. The central detachment included the command and most of the fire-support elements, including the ZPUs, the AGS-17 and the mortars, and could thus fire both in the direction of the tail or the head of the column. This would support the platoon-sized offensive element that, in the case of an ambush, immediately debussed and launched a counter-attack into the enemy flank – but with instruction to not pursue it for more than about one kilometre from the road.

One of the first *Compañía Venceremos* engagements took place on 8 February 1983, when

protecting the convoy and another launching instant counterattacks in the case of an ambush. Accordingly, the size of convoys was

it escorted a 17 truck strong FAPLA convoy moving from N’gunza to Lobito. After travelling for about 70 kilometres, the convoy’s



leading elements came upon a 25-man strong PLAN platoon that had run into an ambush while travelling in four vehicles and was on the verge of being overwhelmed by a company-seized FALA force. In a matter of minutes, the Namibian fighters had lost three killed and nine wounded in action. The Cuban company reacted swiftly: because the terrain did not allow a cross-country advance, the counter-attack platoon, supported by the BRDM-2, advanced straight down the road and swiftly covered the 1,000 metres separating the convoy from the ambush site, all the while covered by 82mm mortars. This

sudden attack forced the enemy ambush party to withdraw, leaving nine killed behind. Concluding that this experiment was successful, the HQ of the MMCA then decided to raise at least three similar convoy-escort companies, based at Huambo, Lubango and Matala. Furthermore, it began carefully coordinating the movement of all convoys, in order to ascertain these could be provided with air support at short notice.

If the existence of these specialized companies undoubtedly made things much more difficult for UNITA, the threat to supply



A rear view of another of armoured Ural truck of the *Compañía Venceremos*. Notable is the wider and taller combat compartment of this vehicle in comparison to the one shown in the previous photograph, and the large rear door – enabling either the transport of the injured, or quick disembarkation of infantry. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

convoys remained high – and then to a point where being assigned to convoy duties remained one of the riskiest tasks for the Cuban troops in Angola throughout the entire war: this is shown by the fact that each FAR soldier deployed in the country had to take part in at least five convoy-escort operations during his two-year tour of duty. Foremost, as well as ambushes, there was an ever-present threat of landmines, in turn prompting the MMCA to add bulldozers and BMP-1 IFVs to convoy protection.<sup>22</sup>

## 6

### MOBILE WARFARE

By mid-1981, UNITA was firmly in control of most of the Cuando Cubango province as only Menongue, Cuito Cuanavale, Baixo Longa and Caiundo remained in government hands. Furthermore, with Mavinga definitely secured, it had gained – thanks to the nearby airstrip – a crucial logistic hub to sustain further advances from its semi-regular forces northward towards the weakly defended Moxico province. FALA obviously held the initiative as available intelligence assessed that it had twelve semi-regular battalions concentrated in Cuando Cubango. Cuban and Angolan commanders thus developed the plan for a large-scale counter-offensive – Operation *Camilio Cienfuegos* – to eliminate FALA concentrations between Menongue and Cuito Cuanavale before proceeding with an advance on Mavinga. However, this project was discarded because it proved impossible to concentrate sufficient troops without endangering other areas. As a result, the FALA remained free to continue its own offensives. On 16 September and 13 October 1981, its semi-regular forces overran the villages of Rito and Lupire, respectively, each defended by one battalion. UNITA thus tightened its grip over the Cuando Cubango province. This development superimposed the

possession of Lupire, about 75 kilometres from Cuito Cuanavale, because it was situated very close to UNITA's primary supply link – the road from Mavinga into the Moxico province.

The following month, radio intercepts by the Cuban SIGINT unit indicated that UNITA was preparing a massive attack into Cuando Cubango. Correspondingly, the FAR prepared the defences of Menongue – the expected target. However, this offensive failed to materialise. Instead, the FALA's semi-regulars made their first move into Moxico and deployed two battalions to seize Chiumbe, on 6 December 1981, and then Ninda, on 27 December. Meanwhile, the 275th Battalion FALA besieged the town of Cangombe – defended by a badly understrength battalion of the FAPLA (about 200 troops with a few ODP elements). To the surprise of many, the garrison held out: indeed, on 29 December 1981, it smashed an assault of the 275th Battalion, killing the enemy commander in the process. Rather confused by this outcome, the insurgents then limited themselves to keeping Cangombe isolated.<sup>1</sup>

With the return of the dry season of 1982, the FAPLA then launched a new set of operations in Cuando Cubango province:

nearly all degenerated into slugging matches with FALA's semi-regulars. The 36th BrIL left Cuito Cuanavale on 1 June 1982 with orders to move toward Baixo Longa and then Vila Nova de Armada to reinforce the latter garrison – beginning a 20 day long journey that turned into an ordeal. On 5 June, and while still 45 kilometres from its point of departure, the brigade ran into the first of a series of murderous ambushes. During this first combat alone, 36th BrIL lost seven vehicles destroyed, with 26 men killed and 73 wounded. Indeed, it soon appeared that FALA had rushed the four battalion strong 53rd Brigade to oppose the column. Despite these casualties, the FAPLA brigade continued its advance toward Baixo Longo. Devoid of any armoured vehicles, it used its heavy trucks as APCs of sorts, placing them in the front and on the flanks of the column to shield the other, less robust vehicles. On 14 June, the column fell into another ambush set up by the 53rd Brigade, and this time lost six vehicles, with 18 men killed and 38 wounded. Nevertheless, it managed to break through thanks to air support provided by Mi-8 helicopters. The latter, as well as one An-2 biplane then replenished the unit's badly depleted ammunition stocks. Finally, the 36th BrIL arrived in Baixo Longa, where it reinforced itself with a single BTR APC (exact type unknown), before resuming its advance to Vila Nova de Armada – reached without any further large-scale combat. The whole venture seemed nonetheless a blunder for the MMCA; not only that 8 of those killed and 12 of the wounded were Cubans, but dispatching a full brigade into such a remote and unimportant position where it could only remain static was, from their point of view, a waste of resources.

### Operation 118

Despite 36th BrIL's ordeal, another similar unit, the 67th BrIL – reinforced by a single ODP battalion – was ordered to conduct a sweep to clear enemy sanctuaries threatening the road connecting Menongue with Cuito Cuanavale. On 4 August 1982, after several days of cross-country march, the brigade HQ was ordered to split its command into two separate detachments, each consisting of two

battalions, for a simultaneous attack on two different objectives near the rivers of Cuatir and Lussinga. A few days later, one of the two detachments reached the Cuatir river – only to run into semi-regulars from FALA's 53rd Brigade instead of the expected guerrillas. The commanders of the FAPLA light infantry battalion and the ODP militia battalion, as well as the Cuban advisors embedded with the detachment, soon concluded that there was no option but to retreat. However, this decision was countermanded by the HQ of the 67th BrIL, which ordered them to establish a laager on their current position. Unsurprisingly, the detachment soon found itself on the receiving end of heavy mortar fire, and was finally forced to withdraw. By 11 August, the entire affair degenerated into a disaster. As the column pulled back, it came under repeated attacks from the 53rd Brigade, and began falling apart. Its parts, including the Cubans, were dispersed, and several of these went missing, as did a number of FAPLA troops. During the following days, Mi-8 helicopters covered by MiG-17s – both operating from Menongue – were sent to the area to find and extract dozens of isolated soldiers. Nevertheless, by 17 August 1982, one Cuban was still missing, as were several Angolans, while confirmed losses between 9 and 11 August amounted to 18 killed and 60 wounded in action, including 6 and 14 Cubans, respectively.

To deal with the 53rd Brigade's counterattack, the Angolans and Cubans initiated the Operation 118, on 18 August 1982. This saw the advance of two detachments from the 1st BrI and the 67th BrIL of FAPLA supported by three MiG-17s and four Mi-8s, with another – unidentified – force and reconnaissance platoons of the RIM Menongue following as reserve. The FALA quickly recognized the enemy superiority and decided not to oppose it. Operation 118 thus failed to achieve much – except for recovering the body of the missing Cuban. Nevertheless, SIGINT subsequently revealed that the UNITA suffered heavily from air strikes launched before and during this enterprise.<sup>2</sup>

Operation 118 did not end the problems for the FAR and the FAPLA in the Cuando Cubango province. On the contrary.

During the afternoon of 11 September 1982, either a Strela MANPAD or an RPG-7 round shot down an Mi-8 carrying 19 crewmembers and Cuban special forces operators from Menongue to Baixa Longa. In reaction to this attack, the FAPLA/DAA rushed two Alouette III helicopters, one An-26, and several MiG-17s to Menongue during the next two days, and these ran an intensive search and rescue operation in coordination with FAPLA ground forces. The search parties achieved nothing for days, except that the Alouettes and Mi-8s involved were repeatedly fired upon by RPGs. It was only on 6 October 1982 that a FAPLA team finally found and recovered the helicopter's co-pilot,



Command post of an unknown FAPLA brigade during the fighting in the Cuando Cubango province in September 1982. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Captain Hernando Martínez Martínez, the sole survivor: he had spent 25 days hiding in the bush in an area intensively patrolled by UNITA.

That said, the FAPA/DAA exploited the opportunity of having so many aircraft concentrated at Menongue to launch a series of air strikes against UNITA-controlled Mavinga, Luengue, Ninda, and Muie between July and September 1982: while the results of these are usually assessed as ‘anything but successful’, combined with a series of other operations, they did leave a lasting impression upon the insurgents: UNITA subsequently acknowledged the loss of 400 combatants, while exaggerating that it had faced a ‘gigantic offensive’ including ‘17,000 enemy troops supported by dozens of tanks and 35 aircraft’.<sup>3</sup>

### The assault on Moxico

Despite these claims, the FAPLA dry season offensives in Cuando Cubango were clearly not enough to impede FALA's own preparations to launch a campaign into Moxico. By the end of May 1982, the insurgents had taken Sessa and Muie while in June they besieged Cangombe again, mortaring the local airstrip when An-2s attempted to resupply the 32nd BrIL's 82nd Battalion which was defending the town. In July, the latter unit barely managed to repulse two FALA attacks, while by the end of the month the FALA was assessed as having eight semi-regular battalions in the province, supposedly all hellbent upon seizing the Cangombo – Cangamba – Sessa – Lumbala N'guimbo axis. By then, the MR 3 of the FAPLA, which covered the immense province from its headquarters in Luena, controlled only two brigades: the 21st BrI (HQ in Luena) and the 32nd BrIL (HQ in Lumbala N'guimbo). The latter unit was virtually on its own to defend the southern part of the province, and its five infantry battalions were dispersed in Lumbala N'guimbo (former Gago Coutinho), Tempué, Luena, Cangamba and Cangombe. However, the FAPLA headquarters identified the threat in time and dispatched the elite 44th BrIN to Lumbala N'guimbo. In turn, this allowed a withdrawal of the 32nd BrIL headquarters from Cangamba. On 10



A Ural truck full of FAPLA troops returning from a patrol in central Angola in 1982. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



In an attempt to improve the mobility and firepower of its infantry, the FAPLA began installing ever more light artillery pieces on a range of light general purpose and medium trucks, thus converting them into so-called ‘technicals’. This B-10 was installed, on what looks like a French-made vehicle left behind by the Portuguese, in 1982. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Cangombe again, mortaring the local airstrip when An-2s attempted to resupply the 32nd BrIL's 82nd Battalion which was defending the town. In July, the latter unit barely managed to repulse two FALA attacks, while by the end of the month the FALA was assessed as having eight semi-regular battalions in the province, supposedly all hellbent upon seizing the Cangombo – Cangamba – Sessa – Lumbala N'guimbo axis. By then, the MR 3 of the FAPLA, which covered the immense province from its headquarters in Luena, controlled only two brigades: the 21st BrI (HQ in Luena) and the 32nd BrIL (HQ in Lumbala N'guimbo). The latter unit was virtually on its own to defend the southern part of the province, and its five infantry battalions were dispersed in Lumbala N'guimbo (former Gago Coutinho), Tempué, Luena, Cangamba and Cangombe. However, the FAPLA headquarters identified the threat in time and dispatched the elite 44th BrIN to Lumbala N'guimbo. In turn, this allowed a withdrawal of the 32nd BrIL headquarters from Cangamba. On 10

August 1982, the bulk of 44th BrIN left Lumbala N'guimbo and advanced toward Sessa, which it recovered without meeting any significant resistance. The FALA reacted only on 21 August, in the form of a determined counter-attack – which was quickly broken with the help of aircraft from Menongue. Once the locality was secured, the 44th BrIN entrenched itself there.

This was only the start, after several weeks of bringing in reinforcements and supplies, UNITA unleashed its counter-offensive. Between 23 and 27 September, it launched a determined effort to overwhelm the garrisons of Cangombe and Tempué. Both the 82nd Battalion and the 43rd Battalion of the 32nd BrIL held their positions. After licking its wounds, the FALA launched two unsuccessful assaults on the 44th BrIN in October, but these were repulsed too – even though one was supported by no less than two hours of intensive mortar barrage prior to the usual dawn attack from multiple directions. This particular attack even employed

psychological warfare in the form of FALA insurgents wearing traditional masks, implying 'supernatural powers'.<sup>4</sup>

### Ben Ben's triumph

By the end of October 1982, governmental intelligence made a cardinal mistake in believing that FALA's semi-regulars in Moxico had been decimated by their series of unsuccessful attacks between July and October. Correspondingly, the town of Lumbala N'guimbo – the jewel in the crown of the entire area – was protected by just a single battalion of the 44th BrIN and a few ODP detachments since August. This did not remain unknown to UNITA: its intelligence operatives had infiltrated the town already weeks before and had carefully mapped the FAPLA's defence system, while its guerrillas harassed the garrison through interdicting any patrols outside the perimeter. Therefore, the insurgents were in possession of a good picture about what is going on inside, but the garrison was unaware of what was going on outside. After concentrating five semi-regular battalions – total of about 3,000 troops if all were at their full strength – on 7 November 1982 the FALA launched a sudden assault on two poorly protected sectors. The FAPLA's garrison of Lumbala N'guimbo broke and ran: after losing 12 killed, it gave up within only two hours, quickly withdrawing towards Luena while leaving behind all the heavy weaponry, including five B-10 recoilless guns, dozens of vehicles, and the usual stock of supplies and ammunition. Drawing on this success, the FALA returned to assault Cangombe, during November, but both attempts failed although the CO of the 43rd Battalion FAPLA was killed in one of two battles.<sup>5</sup>

Ironically, the FAPLA then launched a counteroffensive of its own, on 6 November, aiming to root out the UNITA expansion into Moxico province, once and for all. The 16th BrI left Cuito Cuanavale along the road towards Lupire. This advance faced FALA units commanded by Colonel Arlindo 'Ben Ben' Pena, a daring and innovative commander and a quickly-rising star among UNITA's officer corps. Pena opted to leave Lupire undefended, and instead to slow down the FAPLA column through a series of ambushes. The 16th BrI thus reached its target, but suffered 95 casualties in the process. The FALA commander could not prevent the 16th BrI's garrison then being reinforced to about 2,000, but he deployed three of his semi-regular battalions to cut off the brigade from the point of its departure, while constantly harassing its new base with mortars. Furthermore, Pena deployed several teams armed with Strela MANPADS, thus making attempts by An-26 transports to resupply the 16th BrI through landings at the airstrip outside Lupire extremely risky. The FAPA/DAA reacted by using An-2s instead: their single and much less-powerful engine made them difficult to acquire by the SA-7's seeker head. However, they were too small to carry the supplies necessary to sustain a full infantry brigade, even more so because the airstrip was mortared any time an aircraft landed.

After several weeks of this, the commander of the FAPLA unit had no other choice but to break out. On 20 December, the 16th BrI left Lupire in the direction of Cuito Cuanavale in a big 'box' formation. Pena reacted by launching a series of flanking attacks, all the time carefully avoiding a set-piece battle he could ill-afford against a superior enemy. This 'needling' achieved the desired result: the 16th BrI did manage to punch through and return to Cuito Cuanavale, but at the cost of heavy casualties.<sup>6</sup>

The FAPLA's failure to sever the track used by UNITA to resupply its semi-regular troops in southern Moxico and the fall of Lumbala N'guimbo, compromised the ability of the MR 3 to sustain its defence of Cangombe, Cangamba, Tempué and Sessa. Indeed,

through December the FALA had tightened the noose on Cangombe in particular, and intensified mortaring, making any further landings by transport aircraft impossible. Although the Cubans still opposed a withdrawal, the FAPLA then ordered the 82nd Battalion to leave the town and re-deploy to Cangombe, while the 44th BrIN vacated Sessa and moved to Cangamba. Both evacuations were completed by the end of December 1982 – entirely unopposed by the FALA: the insurgents were rather satisfied to find they were now left with sufficient space to expand logistical lines deep into the Moxico.<sup>7</sup>

### FALA unleashed

In January 1983, the FALA intensified its campaign into the Moxico province by launching a string of attacks virtually all over the place. About a dozen villages and towns like Cassamba and Lucusse were quickly overrun, although the 54th BrIL – freshly redeployed to this area – retook the latter. On 9 February, the FALA concentrated its 520-strong 17th Semi-Regular Battalion, a BATE group and several companies of local guerrillas within the main base of UNITA's 57th Military Region (around 60 kilometres from the Benguela railway). From there, Colonel Pena then led this force on Cangonga, on the Benguela railway. Benefitting from intelligence collected by his local scouts, he then deployed two guerrilla companies into an ambush position on the road linking Cangonga with Luena and Coemba, and an SA-7 team near the airfield outside Luena, while ordering the 17th Semi-Regular Battalion into a dawn attack covered by B-10s and mortars. While one of the companies was kept in reserve, the other made a diversionary attack from the east: the main assault followed from the west, while the three remaining companies advanced along the paths already cleared by the insurgents through the extensive minefields in previous days. As could be expected, the 150-man strong garrison was swiftly defeated, survivors fleeing while leaving behind a quarter of their number either killed, wounded, or taken prisoner, together with 30 weapons. The FALA lost two killed and six wounded. Not intending to hold Cangonga, the insurgents took the local population with them and then thoroughly destroyed the town before leaving.<sup>8</sup>

On 19 March 1983, the FALA units intensified their operations against the 32nd BrIL's 43rd Battalion in Tempué. Held by troops that were meanwhile on the verge of starvation, the town received continuously increasing amounts of heavy mortar fire. Gradually, a collapse became inevitable: one of the companies deserted en masse on 3 April, prompting the commander to order a general withdrawal towards Cangamba.

Next, the FALA redirected its attention on Munhango, another town along the Benguela railway. At dawn on 20 April, two semi-regular battalions commanded by Pena invested the place after a 30-minute long mortar barrage directed by FAOs. The following infantry assault overwhelmed the local FAPLA garrison which quickly withdrew, leaving the insurgents to seize another ammunition depot, and collect plentiful food and clothes stockpiled in 11 wagons at the local train station.<sup>9</sup>

### The Bunda Operation

This string of defeats prompted Major Joao Batista de Matos, the CO of MR 3, into planning a large-scale counter-offensive involving virtually all of the available units and with the intention of recovering at least Tempué, destroying FALA's concentration of troops in central Moxico, and re-supplying the remaining isolated garrisons. This divisional-sized enterprise – Operation *Bunda* – began on 29 April 1983, with a concentric advance of the 44th BrIN from Cangamba, 21st BrI from Luena, and 54th BrIL from Lucusse.



However, the operation soon petered out: the 21st BrI was blocked by the Lunge-Bungo River while the 54th BrIL's vanguard was ambushed south of Calapo. Furthermore, in early May an Alouette III carrying officers from Luena to Cangamba crash-landed about a dozen kilometres south of its destination. The crew and passengers completed their journey on foot. However, in the meantime, an infantry company sent after them, together with a heavy truck necessary to recover the damaged helicopter, ran into an ambush and suffered heavy casualties. Both the Ural truck and the Alouette had to be written off.

Amid all of these snafus, the 44th BrIN continued its advance on Tempué at a rather slow pace, and eventually seized the town by the end of May: the FALA did not offer battle. The *Bunda* operation thus reached only its minimum objective, while completely failing to deal with the 'Damocles sword' looming over the Moxico province. Cuban Colonel Lussón assessed:

The slow pace of the operation and the lack of combativeness of [FAPLA's forces involved in the *Bunda* operation] are cause for concern; we have dozens of Cubans in Calapo, Cangamba and now in Tempué, and it is impossible to keep these forces supplied only by air. It is logical that UNITA will concentrate its efforts on one of these three points.<sup>10</sup>

The FAPLA could not stop fighting the war though, and thus

the 44th BrIN – which meanwhile acted as the 'fire brigade' of the MR 3 – was next deployed all the way from Tempué to recapture Cangonga and Munhango. Once again, the enterprise depended on a concentric advance: it was coordination with MR 4's 18th BrI which marched from the west, and the 21st BrI which approached from Luena. With this, the burden of defending Tempué fell on the 32nd BrIL's 43rd Battalion once again.

This time, the FALA fiercely opposed the 44th BrIN's advance: as soon as the latter crossed the Lunge-Bungo River, a battle erupted in the course of which the FAPLA force was subjected to fierce mortar shelling and repeated flanking attacks while trying to overcome several strongpoints with their own infantry and the few available BTR-152s. Nevertheless, the government troops punched through, forcing the FALA to disperse and content itself with harassing the advancing FAPLA forces, without an attempt to defend Munhango. The town was recovered by mid-June and – due to its location proving suitable for interventions in both the MR 3 and MR 4 – was subsequently converted into a new garrison of the 44th BrIN. Nevertheless, the insurgents remained in the field and now began running circles around the FAPLA brigades elsewhere in Moxico. On 1 July 1983, they seized Cangumbe, on the Benguela railway and a mere 75 kilometres west of Luena, thus forcing the MR 3 to counterattack with the 21st BrI. The – meanwhile completely emptied and devastated – town was recovered a few days later.<sup>11</sup>

## 7

### CANGAMBA

By mid-July 1983, the MR 3 of the FAPLA still had to rely on just the same four brigades as a year earlier, the 21st BrI, the 44th BrIN, and the 32nd and 54th BrIL – even though these were completely exhausted and on average at about 60% of their nominal strength. Indeed, all four combined only had 4,259 officers and other ranks available. This contrasted with UNITA that not only held the initiative because it was free to concentrate its forces at the place and time of its own choosing, but also because while virtually all the FAPLA units were dispersed and immobilized by the necessity to defend their garrisons, the insurgency also possessed quantitative superiority. Cuban intelligence assessed that FALA had 6,000 fighters in the province, including a dozen semi-regular battalions with 3,600 combatants, as well as two brigade headquarters – the 12th and the 34th – all controlled by the 1st Strategic Front. Accordingly, the MMCA top command suggested launching a large-scale offensive in the province between August and October. However, such an operation would require the involvement of several of FAPLA's 'regular' brigades – which not only the Angolans but their Soviet advisors too were very reluctant to release for COIN operations. Thus, precisely nothing happened in time to pre-empt the next UNITA offensive.

**Table 14: FAPLA's MR 3, July 1983**

Location	Location	Notes
Cangumbe	21st BrI	
Cangamba	32nd BrIL	town was held by the HQ, support elements and one infantry battalion
Tempué	43rd Battalion (32nd BrIL)	
Calapo and Lucuse	54th BrIL	garrison reinforced by one battalion from 32nd BrIL
Munhango	44th BrIN	

Worst of all in this situation was that the neighbouring MR 6 – which was responsible for the Cuando-Cubango province – could not be relied upon to relieve the UNITA pressure by striking into its rear as attempted with the 16th BrI in November and December 1982: its forces were overstretched, even to a greater extent than those of the MR 3: as of early January 1983, the MR 6 could muster around 8,400 officers and other ranks in total against about 9,200 insurgents active in the Cuando Cubango. This imbalance further increased early in the same month, when a column of the 53rd BrIL was ambushed about 40 kilometres north of Caiundo and lost 24 killed along with 12 vehicles. During the whole month of July 1983, UNITA continued to increase the pressure in Moxico province: through May and June the number of its offensive operations doubled as it launched numerous small-scale attacks on Cangamba,

Tempuê, Calapo and Cangumbe, inflicting further casualties to the government forces. Moreover, on 26 July, the insurgents claimed to have blown up a train carrying the 73rd Battalion of the 21st BrI to Luena – a town that lost all land communications to the CFB, and where the civilian population was meanwhile known to be suffering from food shortages.<sup>1</sup>

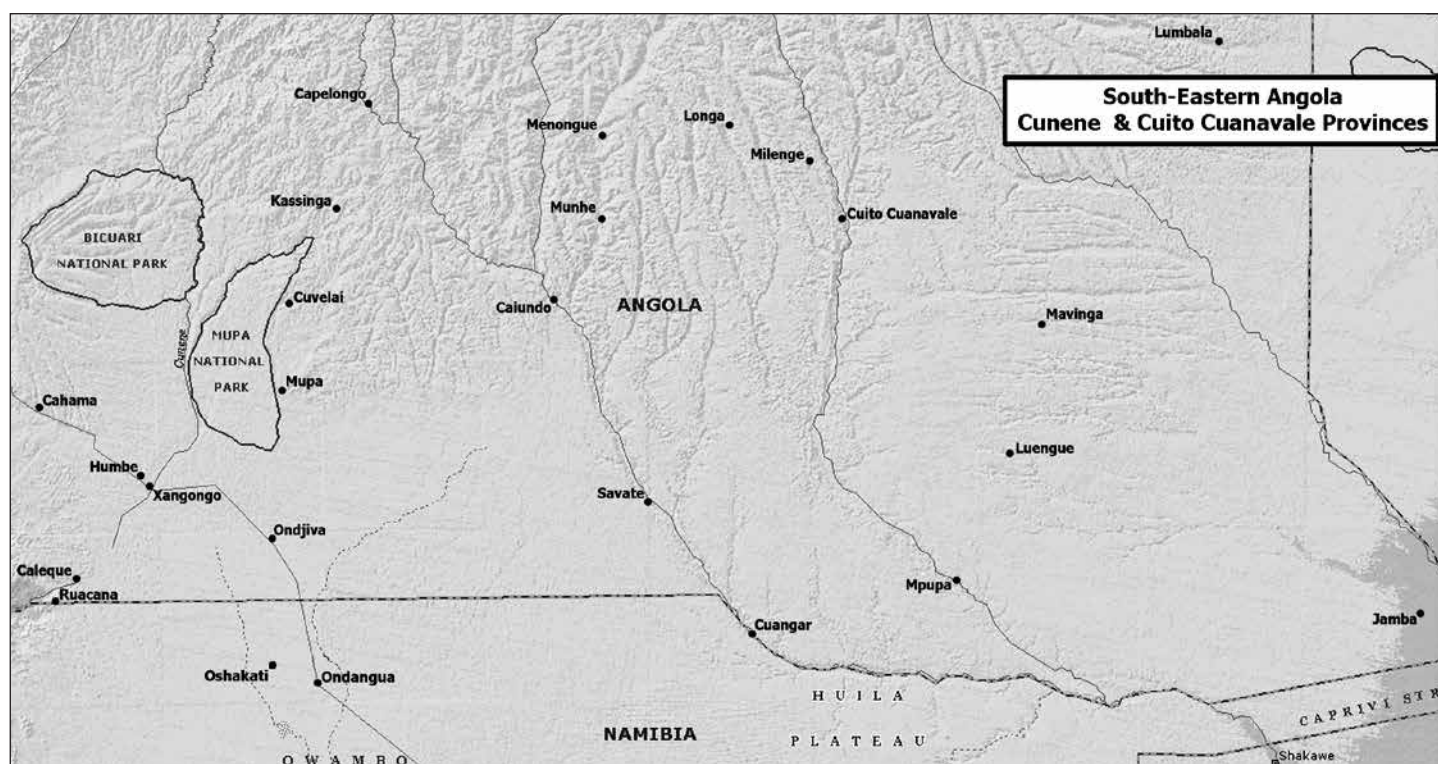
Nevertheless, all of this was still ‘just a smokescreen’ hiding UNITA’s actual intention – which was to land a massive blow against Cangamba. From June 1983 on, the insurgents increased the tempo of their harassing operations against the town, while gathering as much intelligence as possible about its garrison by infiltrating their reconnaissance elements among the 8,000 strong civilian population. Meanwhile, FALA’s mortar crews concentrated on interdicting the air traffic by systematically opening fire on the 2,300-meter long and 30-meter wide airstrip anytime an aircraft was approaching. On 29 May, one An-26 was damaged because its Angolan crew, distracted by mortar shelling, retracted the landing gear too early while the aircraft was still taking off. The stricken Antonov was removed from the landing strip but could not be removed from the airport: it had to remain on the apron, waiting for necessary spares and repairs. Attracted by this target, the FALA then moved several SA-7 teams into the area, further complicating the FAPA/DAA’s task of resupplying the garrison. By July, the Angolans and Cubans were forced to escort every single aircraft and helicopter involved in the effort. Meanwhile, small insurgent teams were occasionally running probing attacks – all of which suddenly ceased on 25 July.<sup>2</sup>

### Hodgepodge

The government garrison of Cangamba was less than 1,200 strong. The bulk of it consisted of FAPLA regulars – including the HQ of the 32nd BrIL and its support elements, and one of the brigade’s infantry battalions, all under the command of 1st Lieutenant Paulino N’Gola (CO 32nd BrIL). Other elements included a company of about 100 troops left behind by the 44th BrIN, a battalion of the 21st BrI – all together 818 officers and other ranks and about

300 of ODP’s ‘part-time’ militiamen.<sup>3</sup> The full complement of 92 Cuban advisors attached to the 32nd BrIL was also there and led by Lieutenant-Colonel Peraza. The garrison’s heavy armament was limited to seven 82mm mortars, five 75mm anti-tank guns, four Grad-1P rocket launchers, a pair of B-10 recoilless guns, and a pair of BRDM-2s (one of which was unserviceable) – ammunition stocks for all of which were critically low, even more so because during July the garrison was constantly forced to engage enemy mortar teams with counter-battery fire.<sup>4</sup> Notably, the Cubans had their own stocks of ammunition, including 300 7.62mm rounds for every soldier, and about 64,000 rounds in reserve.

Cuban intelligence was meanwhile reporting the presence of several semi-regular battalions of the FALA in between Cangamba and Tempuê, but the situation was deemed ‘not critical’ by the High Command FAPLA because it assessed UNITA as repeating the tactics that led to the fall of Sessa and Cangombe – which were to cut off and harass garrisons until these would withdraw on their own. On the contrary, it concluded that the Cangamba garrison was strong enough to cope with the situation on its own.<sup>5</sup> First Lieutenant N’Gola’s men did not stand idle, either: through April, they reinforced the ring of entrenchments around the town. Even so, the resulting defence system had numerous flaws: the first external defence line surrounded the whole of Cangamba and was protected by minefields, but actually presented little other than a trench line, which lacked any kind of communication trenches towards the rear, and any kind of secondary positions that would enable defence in depth. On the contrary, numerous dug-outs containing depots – including those with water tanks – were constructed directly behind the trench line, where they were exposed and poorly-protected. N’Gola’s HQ, and his Cuban advisor, failed to organize cohesive operations of the bulk of the infantry responsible for its defence – a total of six companies: instead, the latter held isolated sections of the trench: several minefields thus remained unprotected. There was no arrangement for artillery support and no contingency planning for counter-attacks. Finally, thick bush in front of the perimeter



A map of Cunene and Cuito Cuanavale provinces of south-eastern Angola. (Map by Tom Cooper)



was never cleared, offering plentiful of concealment to enemy assault teams.

The second defence line consisted of about 900 metres of trench protecting the 32nd BrIL's HQ – and the Cubans. Indeed, from the very beginning of Operation *Carlota* onwards, Cuban personnel attached to FAPLA units were instructed to operate in groups strong enough to fend for themselves if needed – in case the local troops they were advising deserted them and left them on their own. Correspondingly, *Mission Olivo's* rules of engagement specified that the Cuban advisors were not to disperse in FAPLA's separate battalions but were to keep together, and operate at the brigade level. Moreover, while containing multiple firing positions for light machine guns, and well connected

with the help of about 300 metres of communication trenches, this second defensive perimeter – approximately a football field-sized area about 250m long and 150m wide – was divided into two distinct areas separated by wire fences: the northern housed the 32nd BrIL's HQ and was defended by its own troops, while the Cubans held the southern end. A direct result of this was that from early July on, the Cubans concentrated on building up the second defence line and did not cooperate at all with the FAPLA troops preparing the first defensive line. Deeply excavated shelters (most of them with top cover consisting of logs or discarded vehicles, covered by a thick layer of earth) and bunkers were used to house troops, heavy weapons, command and medical posts, and depots with stocks of food, water, and other supplies for 200 troops. For all practical purposes, the majority of Cuban-used shelters were impervious to mortar fire. Nevertheless, several included design-flaws foremost in the form of straight segments of trenches leading directly to their entrance. The actual primary weakness of the inner defence line was its small size, which limited the number of troops that could be safely kept there.

Finally, not only was there lax operational security inside the town (allowing UNITA's agents to embed themselves amongst the civilians and closely observe defensive positions), but another major failure of the 32nd BrIL's commanders was that they failed to garrison high ground around the town. Indeed, starting in July they also ceased sending patrols outside the perimeter to gather intelligence on the enemy – and thus failed to detect the rapidly-expanding concentration of UNITA just a few kilometres away.<sup>6</sup>



A still from a video showing a mortar team of the FALA with its South African-provided 120mm piece in position. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

### The Karton Operation

With Jonas Savimbi opting for a massive onslaught on Cangamba and overwhelming the local garrison in a day at most, during July 1983 the FALA amassed over 3,000 combatants of its 7th, 66th, 111th and 333rd Semi-Regular Battalions outside the town – one of the largest concentrations ever. The 333rd Battalion in particular had earned itself the reputation of an 'elite' formation. From the standpoint of the insurgency, the place was of crucial importance: it would remove a major obstacle to a further offensive on Luena, the provincial capital, while the killing or capturing of nearly a hundred Cuban troops would also deliver a shattering blow against Havana. The task of coordinating this operation fell on the brigade headquarters commanded by Brigadier Demosthenes Chilingutula, the Chief of Staff FALA, assisted by Colonel Peregrino Isidro Chindondo 'Wambu', the FALA's Chief of Military Intelligence.<sup>7</sup>

In preparation for the coming onslaught, Chilingutula and Peregrino prepared several sandboxes based on intelligence collected over the previous weeks to brief their sub-commanders and troops, while even every – apparently 'random' – mortar round was used to zero-in the tubes on specific targets. However, Chilingutula had no intention of simply unleashing his combatants into a 'human-wave' style of attack across the minefields and external defensive perimeter: instead, he first ran several multi-battalion training exercises to hone his own skills and those of his commanders. Following these, the FALA officers concluded that they would require a level of artillery support they had never received before, but also that they were lacking the skills to efficiently deploy their heavy mortars and the few available 76mm ZiS-3 field guns. Therefore, UNITA began coordinating with the South Africans and, later on, sent several of its mortar-teams for training by the SADF on 120mm mortars in



A FALA machine-gunner with his RPD light machine gun. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

South West Africa. Furthermore, Pretoria agreed to – within the limits of Operation *Kartou* – deploy a team of artillery specialists to the Cangamba area. One of them, Lieutenant Peter Williams, was to act as a FAO. Finally, the SAAF planned to provide Aerospatiale SA.330B Puma helicopters for casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) and, if necessary, Lockheed C-130 Hercules transports for resupply.

In addition to its usual complement of 60mm and 81mm mortars, the FALA thus amassed a small number of 120mm mortars, a few Grad-1P launchers, four SA-7 teams, seven 14.5mm ZPU-4 quadruple machineguns, and a vast stockpile of ammunition. While the heavier weapons were kept well away from Cangamba, mortar teams were positioned on, or around, Hill 104, or quite close to it.<sup>8</sup>

### Siege

At dawn on 2 August 1983, the 1st Strategic Front launched simultaneous battalion-sized diversionary attacks against Calapo, Cangumbe, Munhango and Tempué, aiming to tie down the local garrisons. Meanwhile, at 0555 hrs, a massive and protracted artillery barrage was poured into Cangamba, with several 82mm and 120mm mortars concentrating on creating paths across the minefields while other guns and mortars targeted the enemy support weapons, destroying two 82mm mortars, both B-10s and one Grad-1P.

A multipronged infantry assault by the 66th, 7th, and 111th Battalions followed around noon, while the 333rd battalion was kept in reserve. The assault teams suffered severe casualties while crossing the minefields but by mid-afternoon, FALA troops broke through a position held by an engineer company and began to infiltrate the town, separating the two defensive perimeters. However, the five other FAPLA companies defending the first line continued to hold their positions despite the threat of being cut-off. At this point in time, the defenders received support from three MiG-21PFM fighter-bombers, which saved the day by bombing and then delivering precise firing passes on the insurgent infantry, forcing it to withdraw from the breach while under a counter-attack of the FAPLA. At 1730 hrs, Chilingutilla thus ordered the 333rd Battalion to launch another attack from the south, aiming to overrun the airstrip: even this failed within less than one hour, foremost because

of the minefields.

By the end of the day, it was clear that the Savimbi's gamble of seizing Cangamba within a day had failed and the battle was likely to degenerate into a protracted and bloody siege. Therefore, UNITA rushed all available reinforcements to the scene, including the 90th, 275th and 618th Semi-Regular Battalions.<sup>9</sup> In turn, and while the ODP militia suffered staggering casualties, the FAPLA garrison was reinforced through the deployment of about 100 FAR troops brought in with the help of Mi-8 helicopters. While waiting for its own reinforcements, from 3 to 5 August, the FALA alternated fierce artillery bombardments with multi-pronged infantry attacks against

the town, during which it suffered horrendous casualties to the combination of mines, and direct and indirect defensive fire, but also an ever increasing number of air strikes. These forced the surviving insurgents into digging their own trench system – often a mere 30-40 metres away from enemy positions. On at least one occasion, the attackers tried to deceive their opponent by using combatants wearing FAPLA uniforms. However, under the pressure, and despite one successful counter-attack from the 44th BrIN elements on 3 August, the defenders were ineluctably expelled from the external defence line as FALA fighters gained one foothold after another in the trench line and cleared it, lavishly using hand grenades in the process. Thus, the FAPLA troops were forced to withdraw into the inner defensive perimeter: with around 1,000 troops deployed within just four hectares, this now became seriously overcrowded. Furthermore, by the afternoon of 5 August, the insurgents brought the bank of the Cocio River under their control, thus cutting off the defender's water supply.<sup>10</sup>

The fate of the besieged troops was hanging in the balance during the following night: by then, the external line had been completely lost, and both Cuban and Angolan commanders were uncertain about their ability to sustain the siege for much longer. Instead, they began planning a breakthrough toward Tempué. In the end, cooler heads prevailed and this idea was dropped – as it would have unavoidably played right into FALA's hands and ended in the annihilation of the entire garrison. In turn, this command crisis had one longer-lasting effect: due to the fear of an imminent defeat, all the radio encryption materials were destroyed on 5 August, immensely complicating radio communications thereafter as a new code had to be improvised to communicate with the outside world. To make matter worse, there were regular communication breakdowns especially during the night, and one An-26 had to act as an airborne radio relay on several occasions as a result.<sup>11</sup>

From 6 August on, FALA forces made successive attempts to deal with the inner perimeter, but these failed one after the other – all with heavy loss. However, this was not a one-sided game – especially so since FALA mortar and gun crews could concentrate all their firepower against a very small area. Unavoidably, from time



to time, a projectile landed into a crowded trench or shelter and inflicted dreadful casualties, such as on 6 August, when the single operational BRDM-2 was disabled, or the day after when a 120mm mortar shell penetrated through a shelter and killed four Cubans and two Angolans. FALA gunners also repeatedly attempted to trick the defenders, concentrating their fire on the inner part of the defensive perimeter, thus enticing the besieged troops to move into the fighting trenches, only to suddenly switch their fire back to the latter. While mortar fire lessened during the night, the perimeter was constantly under the observation of snipers, and these were the second highest cause of casualties, right after the mortars. During the night from the 7 to 8 August, the garrison was submitted to an extremely fierce barrage, while the following day, FALA semi-regulars launched what proved to be their last all-out attempt to overwhelm Cangamba.<sup>12</sup>

### Tigers to the Rescue

As the news of the assault on Cangamba spread, the ATS mobilised its Lubango-based 57-man strong *Compañía de Exploración de Destino Especial*. At dawn of 3 August 1983, they boarded four Mi-8 helicopters with the intention of being deployed outside the town. Once there, the plan for what was virtually a suicide mission envisaged that the special operators would regroup, assault the FALA mortars, and then break through the insurgent lines to rally the beleaguered garrison. Fortunately for the Cubans involved, the helicopter-crews made a navigational mistake during their tree-top-level ingress and dropped them 30 kilometres outside Cangamba – much too far away from the objective. Undaunted, Mi-8s returned to Luena and embarked another 70 troops for another mission to Cangamba. This time, these were deployed directly into the garrison, with the helicopters providing fire-support for one another. Of course, the arrival of the helicopters and troops triggered a virtual rain of mortar shells. The troop disembarkation had to be completed literally in seconds under the incoming mortar fire. The four Mi-8s then went back to Menongue, embarked another 40 Cuban troops, landed them in Cangamba, retrieved the isolated special forces company and then carried its men back to Luena.

In Luena, the *Compañía de Exploración de Destino Especial* was used as a core to form a full battalion by agglomerating 150 Angolan special forces operatives, a Cuban platoon with three AGS-17 grenade-launchers, two forward air controllers, two PLAN operatives and one counter-intelligence specialist. By 6 August, this 221-man strong mixed asset – that meanwhile further included two forward air controllers (FACs), an AGS-17 platoon with 10 troops, and three infantry companies of 65–68 troops each, led by a HQ-section of six – was ready and it promptly received the code-word ‘Tiger’. It was subjected to the command of Major Rafael Angel Ramos, with Captain Santiago Pérez Gómez commanding the 1st Company, Lieutenant José García Arrieta the 2nd Company, and 1st Lieutenant

Ramón Estrada Rojas the 3rd Company.

Early on 7 August, the seven available Mi-8s made three flights each to deploy the battalion from Luena to a landing zone about five kilometres outside Cangamba. The first wave landed at 0945 hrs, the second at 1255 hrs, and the third at 1650 hrs – all under the cover of MiG-21s, but also of Mi-8s that emptied their UB-16-57 and UB-32-57 rocket pods upon insurgent positions. The landing attracted next to no reaction from the FALA, and Angel Ramos’ scouts were thus free to investigate insurgent positions while the rest of the unit established a defensive perimeter.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Angel Ramos’ battalion encountered no resistance even while moving to within sight of the external defensive ring. Once there, they could see that the FALA had occupied the latter in strength, but also that 150 metres of open ground separated them from the trenches. In a situation where all the heavier insurgent weapons emplaced on and around Hill 104 were in control of the area, this was not an opportune way in. This became plainly obvious when, once the special forces battalion was discovered by the insurgents, it promptly became pinned down by the enemy fire – and this despite fierce resistance of the AGS-17 section. Eventually, after losing six killed, Angel Ramos ordered a withdrawal. After regrouping, the battalion returned to combat on 8 August, but this time with the intention of flanking the enemy position. However, after some early success, it encountered determined resistance along its entire front. The slugging match repeated itself on 9 August, when even FAC-directed air strikes by MiG-21s failed to break the deadlock. Nevertheless, the special forces did manage to temporarily lessen the pressure upon the besieged garrison to a degree where the seven Mi-8s managed to insert a light infantry company of the FAPLA about two kilometres southeast of Cangamba – just in time before the FALA launched its last large-scale assault. While the FAR and the FAPLA thus failed to achieve a breakthrough, Angel Ramos’ battalion had undoubtedly increased the pressure on the insurgent concentration. This – limited – success came at quite some cost; by then 11 Angolan soldiers were killed, as was a single Namibian, while 24 Angolans and 1 Cuban were injured.<sup>14</sup>



An AGS-17 team of the FAPLA undergoing training on their new equipment under Cuban supervision. The AGS-17 Plamyra was a reasonably advanced infantry support weapon that appeared in Angola in the early 1980s, firing 30mm grenades out to a range of 1,700 metres at up to 400 rounds per minute. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A Cuban forward air controller seen 'in his office' – while guiding fighter-bombers into the attack. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Cuban-flown Mi-8s of the FAPA/DAA played a crucial role in keeping the garrison of Cangamba resupplied and reinforced during the battle. As well as being used for transport purposes, they were armed with UB-16-57 pods (four of which are visible on the helicopter in foreground of this photograph), and flew multiple, very effective air strikes on insurgent positions. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



Exhausted Cuban troops after the battle of Cangamba, together with some of the firearms left behind by the defeated FALA. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

Realizing that the opportunity to overrun Cangamba was definitely over, the insurgents withdrew from their positions surrounding the second defensive line – under cover of heavy mortar fire and then an artillery barrage – on 9 August. By the following morning, they retreated from the town too.

For the besieged troops, it was a pyrrhic victory: virtually all of the heavy equipment of the 32nd BrIL was lost, while 85% of the shelters in the inner perimeter had been either damaged or destroyed. The Cubans estimated that around 1,500 shells, bombs and rockets had fallen into this limited area. The damaged An-26 immobilized on the airstrip – serial T-202 – was destroyed as well. The FAPLA troops lost at least 70 killed and 177 wounded between

2 and 9 August, while the number of ODP militia casualties remain unknown. The Cuban detachment in Cangamba lost 16 killed and 26 wounded, while another man was missing in action. Still, the UNITA losses were also devastating: 493 dead fighters were found in the town thereafter, and there were strong indications that the bodies of many more had been evacuated in a great rush, as hundreds of additional rifles were recovered from the battlefield, together with several 60mm mortars and extensive stocks of ammunition.<sup>15</sup>

### Fishbeds Unleashed<sup>16</sup>

While there is no doubt that the 32nd BrIL and attached FAR advisors fought with determination and great courage at Cangamba, it was not their resistance that forced UNITA to give up but – in a nutshell – the airpower of the DAAFAR. The latter not only prevented the insurgents from making the most of their superior artillery – because they had to cease fire anytime combat aircraft appeared over the battlefield – but, also allowed the government forces to both resupply and reinforce the besieged garrison, and to land two infantry forces in the enemy's rear, thus creating insecurity. The latter point was crucial because UNITA could not take even the slightest risk of letting the enemy special forces infiltrate its positions and capture one of their South African advisors. To obtain such results, both the FAPA/DAA and DAAFAR engaged in a massive effort, which bears testimony to the intricacies of deploying airpower in areas not well provided with adequate facilities and supplies.

The mobilisation began on 2 August at 1100 hrs in the morning when Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Pérez and Edilberto Lee King, and Captain Rigoberto Riverón – three out of the four Cuban jet pilots assigned permanently to support the *Olivo* Mission – took off from Huambo AB aboard their MiG-21PFMs, including examples wearing serial numbers C-55 and C-111, each armed with a pair of UB-16-57 pods for 57mm S-5 rockets. The trio landed at Menongue AB at 1202 hrs, refuelled and took off again at 1235 hrs for the last leg of their trip to Cangamba, where they arrived at 1252 hrs. Around 30 kilometres before their destination, the three jets lowered their altitude and switched to attack formation, with one MiG remaining at an altitude of 3,000 meters to guide the two others. Once over the target, the first two MiGs unleashed their rockets against enemy positions four kilometres from the town. The trio then made its return flight to Menongue at 7,000 meters to save fuel. Indeed, on average, MiG-21s operating from Menongue AB needed 20 to 24 minutes to reach Cangambe and could thus loiter for only 10 minutes over the target area. By midday on 2 August, Colonel Martínez Puentes, the head of the DAAFAR contingent in Angola, had approved the release of further Cuban-operated MiG-21s from the Lubango-based fighter regiment. At 1630 hrs, another four MiG-21Bis (pilots Oscar Romero, Raúl Fernández, Gustavo Alonso and Ramón Quesada) landed at Menongue AB, followed in the early evening by a pair of MiG-21MFs (pilots Jorge Lombidez and Fidel Pérez). Less than one hour after their landing, the four MiG-21Bis, loaded with RBK-250 bombs and UB-16-57 rocket pods were sent for their first strike mission, together with Henry Pérez and Edilberto Lee King's MiG-21PFMs that, already familiar with area, took the lead of the formation.<sup>17</sup>

The nine MiG-21 pilots flew 21 strike missions against Cangamba the following day. From 3 August on, they attempted to dispatch a pair of fighters every 15 to 20 minutes, to keep a presence of combat aircraft over the battlefield as long as possible, thus forcing the enemy mortar crews to cease fire. Aside of their bombing and strafing runs against FALA positions, they also provided cover for



**Table 15: DAAFAR Pilots in Battle of Cangamba, 2-10 August 1983**

Rank	Name	Aircraft Type	Number of Missions and Flight Time
Lt. Col.	Henry Pérez	MiG-21PFM	33 sorties, 34 hours
Lt. Col.	Edilberto Lee King	MiG-21PFM	31 sorties, 29.10 hours
Maj	Oscar Romero Lezcano	MiG-21bis	22 sorties, 19.55 hours
Capt	Rigoberto Riverón	MiG-21PFM	14 sorties, 13.26 hours
Capt	Julio Chiong		unfit to fly, acted as FAC in Cangamba
Lt	Ramon Quesada	MiG-21bis	23 sorties, 22.54 hours
Lt	Raul Fernandez	MiG-21bis	22 sorties, 20.16 hours
1st Lt	Félix G Alonso Rodriguez	MiG-21bis	21 sorties, 20.36 hours
1st Lt	Fidel Pérez Fijeira	MiG-21MF	21 sorties, 20.16 hours
1st Lt	Lombidez Chamizo	MiG-21MF	16 sorties, 15.49 hours

the helicopters attempting to reinforce the garrison.

Meanwhile, FAPA/DAA was entering the fray too; one Angolan An-26 converted into a bomber, operating from Luena, dropped its load of bombs on enemy concentrations around Cangamba on two occasions that day. It was however at night, when the MiGs could not operate, that the Antonovs proved irreplaceable. While some were used as radio relays to palliate for the endemic communications breakdown that plagued the garrison, others, carrying a total of up to four 500kg bombs, two attached on each side of their fuselage, regularly circled over Cangamba for hours, taking their time before targeting the insurgents below. Although the precision of their bombing runs remains questionable, their mere presence reduced artillery and mortar fire against the garrison. Furthermore, on 7 August, FAPA/DAA had dispatched at least two of its brand-new Pilatus PC-7s from the Attack and Reconnaissance Squadron (*Esquadra de Reconhecimento e Assalto*) to fly reconnaissance. The two light aircraft clocked a total of 10 missions by 10 August 1983.

The primary problem for all of the MiG pilots involved was the lack of FACs: this impeded their attempts to provide close air support (CAS) to the besieged 32nd BrIL, especially-so as the positions of the latter were closely hugged by the insurgents, thus increasing the risk of ‘red on red’ incidents. Therefore, on 4 August, Cuban-operated Mi-8s not only conducted resupply and CASEVAC operations but deployed Luis Galván to Cangamba, a badly needed doctor, and Julio Chiong, a grounded MiG-21 pilot. The latter, equipped with an R-809 radio, acted as FAC and his presence drastically increased the precision of air strikes – which continued unabated until the end of the battle. Indeed, by 11 August, the nine fighters had flown 203 missions, in the course of which they dropped 400 bombs and fired 2,700 23mm rounds and a similar number of 57mm S-5 rockets. To maximise the precision of their bombing runs, the MiG pilots routinely violated all the release safety parameters, as Lt. Ramón Quesada explained;

We dropped our bombs from less than 300 meters altitude, from shallow dive, almost in horizontal flight [...] with a lot of speed to quickly leave the area of action and evade the enemy fire. The bombs come out with good speed and little height, little time of flight so [...] we always hit the target, be it the church, the kimbo [township; author note], or the airstrip.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, and from 5 August on, and because of the defender’s withdrawal toward the inner defensive circle, landing troops and supplies with helicopters became impossible. Thus, both Mi-8s and An-26s could only fly over the perimeter at low

altitude and drop their supplies – with their cargoes more often than not ending in the hands of the insurgents instead of their intended recipients.

### Shadow Boxing<sup>19</sup>

Surprisingly or not, UNITA’s anti-aircraft artillery and SA-7-teams failed to shoot down a single aircraft or helicopter during the battle of Cangamba. This was not for the lack of trying – and that despite precisely such positions being one of the primary targets for the air strikes: the Angolan and Cuban pilots actually experienced several close calls. On 4 August, one helicopter and one MiG-21 were damaged by the flak. The following day, an An-26 was also hit by the AAA shortly after ending its dropping pass at 20 meters altitude, but its crew managed to land back in Menongue. On 6 August, the MiG-21PFM serialised C-111 received seven hits while attacking Cangambe, but Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Pérez nursed the injured bird back for a safe landing in Menongue. Shortly after, he launched again in the MiG-21PFM serialised C-55 to fly another attack. Finally, on 8 August, four rounds hit the Mi-8 serialised H-37 in one fuel tank and one rocket pod, but its Angolan crew brought the stricken aircraft safely to base. Indeed, at one point in time, only one out of the four Mi-8s originally present at Menongue was operational – because of both the battle damage received and their extremely intensive use. Fortunately, at least another three Mi-8s soon reinforced the original quartet.<sup>20</sup>

For the South Africans, it became obvious that the deployment of enemy airpower on such a scale could very much tip the scale towards the government forces, and the SAAF reacted accordingly. Puma helicopters not only made several flights to carry ammunition and evacuate FALA casualties, but two of those also dropped a further SA-7 team to strengthen the air defence around Cangamba. Furthermore, the South African C-130s flew five nocturnal sorties to drop cargoes of ammunition. This logistical help was invaluable because FALA had not planned for such a protracted battle and it would have taken weeks for its fleet of trucks to carry similar amounts of ammunition to Cangamba.

Moreover, the SAAF also decided to engage itself in a more aggressive – but still entirely deniable – fashion to slow down the pace of Cuban airstrikes. On 5 August, six Dassault Mirage F.1AZ fighter-bombers from No. 1 Squadron were ordered to fly from Hoedspruit AB to Ondangwa forward operating base (FOB), each carrying a 1,200 litre belly tank and a pair of V3B air-to-air missiles. On 6 August, they took off from Ondangwa and flew well within range and sight of Cuban-operated radars positioned outside Menongue, deliberately attempting to not only be detected but

perhaps to incite some of the MiGs into an air combat, and thus slow down their air strikes on the UNITA at Cangamba. The rules of engagement issued to their pilots were crystal clear: 'Any MiG interference was to be regarded as offensive and dealt with by the Mirage.'<sup>21</sup>

The SAAF operation did not last long, and by 7 August in the evening, the six Mirages were back to Hoedspruit AB. While they did not trigger any kind of response, their penetration deep into Angolan airspace on 6 August had the intended effect, as recalled by Major Oscar Romero Lezcano;

During the day's second mission, the ground controller gives us indications that Mirage planes were heading toward us. We dropped the bombs and went to the air-air variant, and took a 100 course toward the Mirage, but at the distance of thirty kilometres the ground control ordered us to return to the airfield.<sup>22</sup>

Thereafter, the firepower of at least one in each four-aircraft 'strike package' of MiG-21s was halved: while two of MiG-21PFMs – hopelessly obsolete for air combat – carried their usual load of air-to-ground ordnance, one of two accompanying MiG-21MFs or MiG-21bis' was always armed with R-3S air-to-air missiles only.

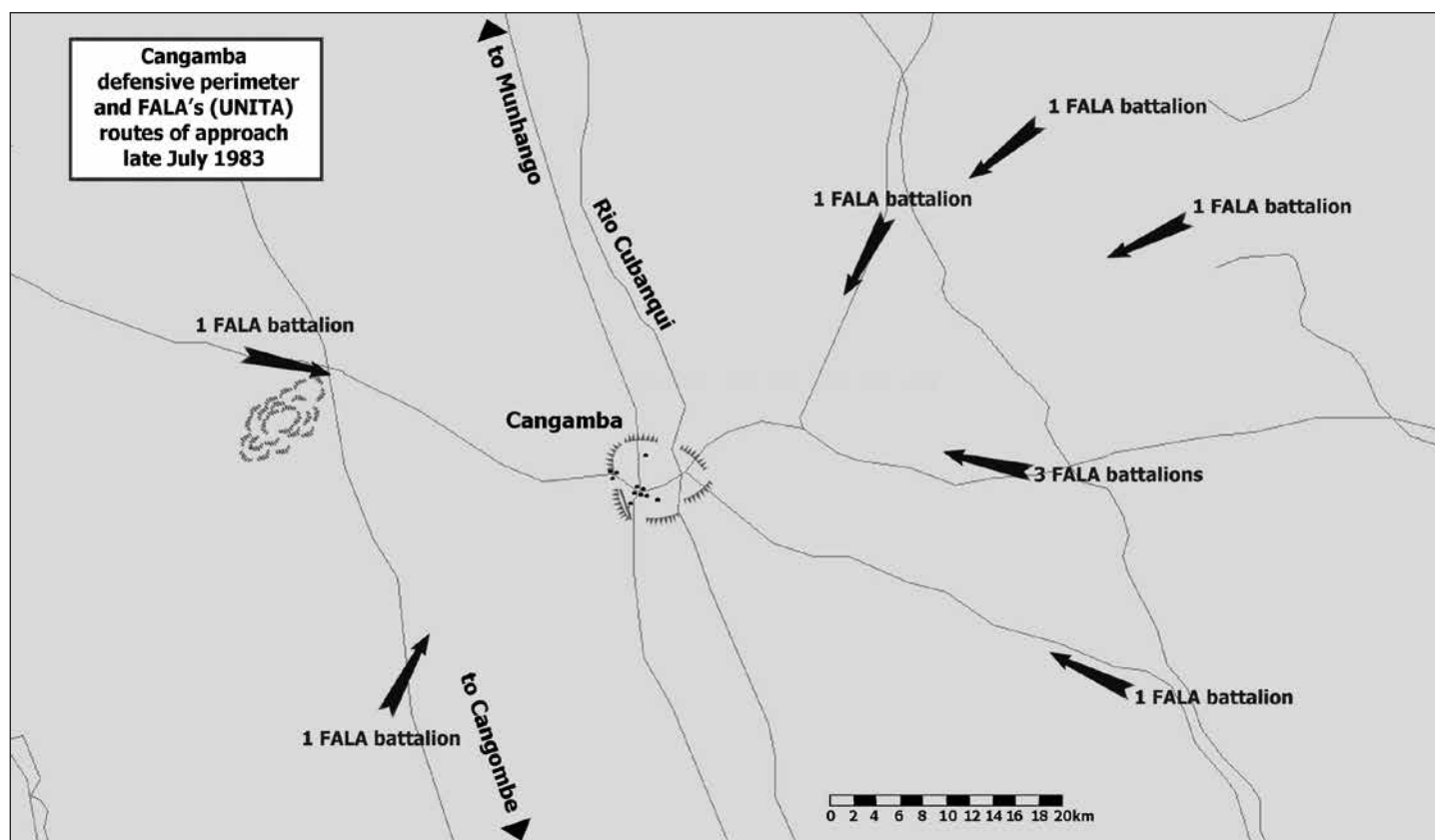
### The S-5 Crisis

Ironically, it was not the intrusions by SAAF Mirages that had very serious effects upon the operations of the DAAFAR and the FAPA/DAA. On the contrary: as of 1983, there were dozens of fighter-bombers available in Angola. The problem was to deploy them where they counted – and then keep them supplied. The only two available airfields with paved runways suitable for MiG-21 operations in range of Cangamba were Luena and Menongue. The latter in particular, was closer to Lubango, where the bulk of fighter-bombers were concentrated, but still lacked the necessary support

infrastructure. In Menongue, there was only one 200 metre wide ramp available to park and service, refuel and rearm the aircraft. As virtually all the jets had to be operated within such a confined space, there was always a grave danger of an inadvertent catastrophe.

While the small parking area was in itself a major bottleneck, worse was that there were no adequate quantities of fuel and ammunition stocked in advance in Menongue and Luena. As a result, no less than 40 An-26, 28 An-12, 21 C-130 and 6 Boeing 707 flights had to be undertaken to haul all the necessary ammunition, spares and supplies to Menongue and Luena – including 16,000 litres of aviation fuel, 400 bombs, 3,000 23mm rounds, and almost 4,000 S-5 rockets, all just to keep nine MiG-21s operational. Even then, some of the equipment could not be provided in time: this was especially the case with oxygen compressors necessary for MiG-21s: the consequence was that their pilots repeatedly had to fly at altitudes of 4,000-6,000 metres without breathing pure oxygen, as prescribed for fast jet operations. This in turn lowered their loiter time over Cangamba – the rule was that the higher an aircraft flew (especially the MiG-21, originally designed for high-altitude operations), the less fuel it spent; and, versa-vice, the lower an aircraft flew, the higher the fuel consumption.<sup>23</sup>

Another enduring problem became the availability of S-5 rockets. The Mi-8s and the MiG-21s were expending them in enormous quantities. In the case of the MiGs, there was no alternative because of the proximity of the enemy to friendly positions. The available supply thus dried up extremely rapidly and virtually all the rounds stockpiled anywhere in Angola were eventually flown to Menongue. Even this proved insufficient: by 6 August, there were only 400 S-5 rockets left in all of the country! During the first days of the battle, the Cubans thus contacted their Soviet counterparts, requesting an urgent delivery of several thousand rounds. On 4 August, Moscow agreed to send 4,000 of these by air transport – but they could not be delivered before 10 August, at the earliest. The S-5 crisis escalated



A map of the Cangamba area, with FALA's original defence perimeter and FALA's approach routes as reported by Cuban intelligence. (Map by Tom Cooper)



all the way to the top of the Cuban hierarchy, until on the evening of 7 August, when Fidel Castro himself ordered the dispatch of 2,200 rockets from DAAFAR's stocks in Cuba. The following night, a Cuban Il-62 landed in Luanda: rockets were then quickly re-loaded into an An-12 and promptly forwarded to Menongue and Luena. Realising the seriousness of the situation, the Soviets then also rushed and on 9 August an Il-76 arrived in Luanda with another 3,400 rounds.<sup>24</sup>

### The Great Scramble

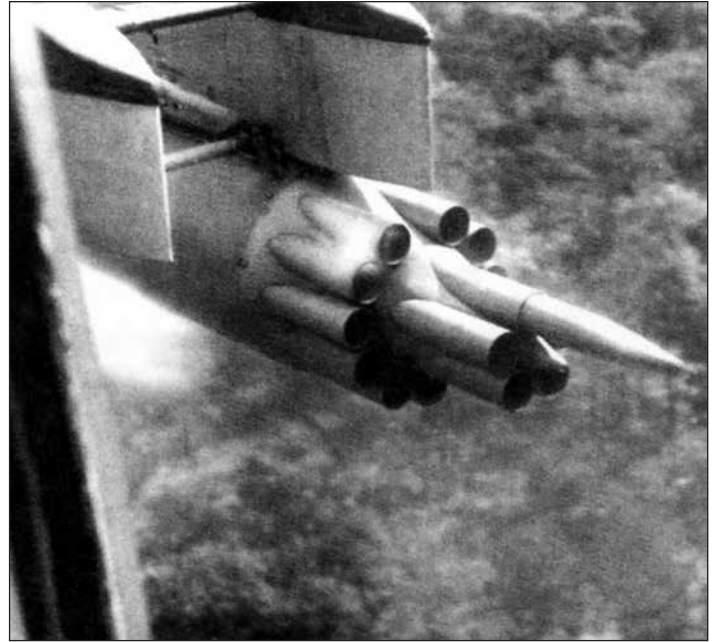
The news of the attack on Cangamba had swiftly escalated all the way to the top of the Cuban hierarchy. Havana reacted by ordering a massive ground counter-offensive – not only to prevent the fall of the town but also avert what the Cuban high command assessed as a major threat against Luena. As a result, six powerful combined detachments were organised in a few days and the first began its move on 3 August, followed by the second on 6 August.

The first detachment included one tank battalion, one motorized infantry battalion, one BM-21 battery and one AAA battery – altogether at least 180 vehicles including 60 armoured ones – all drawn from RIM Huambo. It was placed under command of the latter unit's CO until 6 August, when Brigadier General Romárico Sotomayor García, in charge of the ATS, joined the column and took over command. The armoured detachment left Huambo on 3 August at 1540 hrs, with orders to move to Kuito, and then Camacupa, and Munhango, from there, it was to advance toward Tempué and finally Cangamba. The second detachment was of similar strength, but its units were drawn from RIM Menongue. It included one tank battalion, a BTR-60PB mounted motorized infantry company, one BM-21 Battery, a platoon of ZSU-23-4s, as well as a FAPLA infantry battalion. Colonel Juan Suárez Marreo, the deputy commander of RIM Menongue, led the detachment and the latter left Menongue on the evening of 6 August, with orders to advance to Tempué, where it was to meet with the first detachment to rescue Cangamba together.<sup>25</sup>

It was planned that both units would cover around 100 kilometres per day, but these expectations soon proved hopelessly overoptimistic. Indeed, the state of the roads and tracks, and the numerous blown-up bridges, all conspired to cause a massive delay. Furthermore, FALA guerrillas were covering all the main axes, and were instructed to delay any reinforcements moving toward Cangamba. As a result, the tracks were mined and small insurgent groups launched a number of harassing actions, or even set the bush on fire in front of the Cuban columns. In turn, the detachments often found it easier to advance by creating their own new tracks, right across the bush. While this limited the risks of the mines, it also created countless problems, as explained by Colonel Juan Suárez Marreo;

We advanced through sandy areas and when the first cars pass, what remains for the seventh and the rest is a moving ground, as if it was mud. We had to leave the road, going in and out of the mountain, so the tanks do not advance more than ten or twelve kilometres per hour and the engines start to overheat a lot.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, this increased the wear and tear on the vehicles and several of these, hopelessly broken down, were sabotaged and left behind along the way. However, those that could not be left behind, such as the BTRs, had to be repaired at all cost. As single vehicles and their crews could not be left on their own in guerrilla-infested country, this meant that usually the entire column would have to



An S-5 rocket in the process of leaving the tube of a UB-16-57 pod installed on an outboard hardpoint of a Mi-8. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

wait for hours until one vehicle could be fixed. Fuel consumption sky-rocketed as all the vehicles were spending up to four times more fuel than expected. As a result, Mi-8s were called upon to fill the gap and resupply the columns. Hence, at between 30 to 35 kilometres per day, the average pace of advance was one third of what was expected. To add insult to injury, on 8 August, radio contact was lost within hours with the second armoured detachment. A pair of Mi-8s soon left to locate the column, but around 40 kilometres southeast from Tempué, insurgents fired upon the two helicopters – killing one of the pilots, Major Policarpo Sánchez Pileta. The two aircraft returned to base while Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Pérez and Lieutenant Ramon Quesada took off from Menongue with their MiG-21s and struck the insurgent position. Another duo of Mi-8s was sent again to find the lost column and re-establish contact and found it, late in the evening, about 90 kilometres from Tempué. As both units were unable to reach Cangamba in time to take part in the battle, by 12 August, the first detachment was rerouted to Luena to reinforce the defence of the latter city, while the second detachment was ordered back to Menongue.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, the Cubans raised other similar combined force to reinforce south-eastern Angola. On 7 August, the third detachment came into being with one tank battalion drawn from RIM Huambo and one BTR-60PB mounted infantry battalion, one 37mm AAA-battery and one BM-21 battery from the RIM Caala. It was the CO of the latter, Lieutenant Colonel William Mastrapa who took over command. RIM Caala was also instructed to ready a fourth detachment centred on one tank battalion, a BTR-152 mounted infantry battalion, with one 85mm gun battery and one 37mm AAA-battery by 10 August. RIM Caala's Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Ulloa led this detachment. Meanwhile, RIM Matala began to organize the fifth detachment along similar lines. Finally, the sixth detachment – intended to reinforce Luena – was assembled in Luanda, with two T-55 tank companies, one motorized infantry company and one SA-7 platoon drawn from several FAR units in northern Angola, while the Presidential Guard Regiment contributed one BM-21 battery. However, none of these forces took part in the battle; the third reached only a crossroad 30 kilometres from Kuito-Bié; the fourth and the fifth were still in their



Most roads in central, eastern and southern Angola were little more than dirt tracks, which tended to rapidly deteriorate under heavy use, especially so during and immediately after the rainy season. This group of Cuban officers was photographed while inspecting a section repaired by their engineers. (Albert Grandolini Collection)



A team of a Cuban-operated 37mm 'automatic air defence gun M1939 (61-K)' of Soviet origin, together with a group of Soviet advisors. Developed during the Second World War, the 61-K was widely exported during the 1960s and 1970s: in Angola, the towed version (installed on the four-wheeled ZU-7 carriage) saw extensive deployment in ground combat. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

assembly areas as of 10 August, while the day before the sixth had reached Dondo. This general reshuffle also triggered the dispatch of reinforcements directly from Cuba. The FAR elite Airborne Brigade (*Brigada de Desembarco y Asalto*, its CO was Colonel Rodolfo Capote) was ordered to Angola where its first battalion arrived on 11 August, while between 18 and 23 August, the merchants *Donato Mármol*, *Ignacio Agramonte* and *Pepito Tey* sailed from Cuba with an armoured brigade aboard.<sup>28</sup>

### Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory

On 10 August, as the FALA was in full retreat, all the time harassed by An-24s, MiG-21s and Mi-8s, five Mi-8 deployed an infantry company of the FAPLA from Luena to Cangamba. The helicopters also began to evacuate the wounded. Indeed, the situation in the town was assessed secure enough to allow for a visit by high-ranking officials, including the Angolan Minister of Defence. However, the Cubans were aware of how much of a close call the Cangamba battle had been – and determined to not push their luck too far. Accordingly, that same day, they determined to evacuate the town and advised the Angolans to do the same, arguing that both Cangamba, and Tempué were much too isolated, as expressed by Fidel Castro;



The final act in the Battle of Cangamba was an air strike by four Canberra and four Buccaneer bombers of the SAAF on the HQ 32nd BrIL. This photograph shows one of the Buccaneers releasing a load of 1,000lb (454kg) bombs from medium level over Angola in the early 1980s. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

It has been a great success and we have dealt a great defeat to the enemy but it would not be rational to aim for more at this moment.<sup>29</sup>

From the Cuban perspective, only a large-scale offensive could turn the table in any meaningful way in Moxico Province, but with the rainy season approaching, such an undertaking could take place only the next year. At first, President Dos Santos was in agreement with this – until a contradictory stance came from General Konstantin Kurochkin, the head of the Soviet Military Mission. According to him, FALA's defeat was an opportunity to be exploited as soon as possible. To do this, Cangamba should be used as a springboard to launch a counter-offensive with the newly inducted FAR Airborne brigade and other FAPLA forces. As so often when caught between contradictory advice from their two main mentors, the Angolan wavered and delayed any evacuation of his troops. Castro's reaction was straightforward; he confirmed his order for an outright evacuation of the Cuban troops from Cangamba. On 12 August, seven Mi-8 carried FAPLA reinforcements to the town and evacuated the Cuban personnel.<sup>30</sup>

### Bail-Out

It took a mere two days to prove the Cubans right. Indeed, Jonas Savimbi was determined to salvage the failed FALA offensive and had a last card to play. The UNITA president thus travelled to South Africa and requested direct support from the SADF. Despite some initial reluctance, the South Africans finally approved a single SAAF airstrike and dispatched an air force officer near Cangamba to gather the necessary intelligence. To his surprise, and contrary to what he





This photograph was taken by the strike-camera of one of the SAAF aircraft involved in the strike on the HQ 32nd BrIL, and shows a bomb that missed by about 100 metres, hitting the ground on the western edge of the runway. The aircraft visible on the tarmac was the An-26 T-202 of the FAPA/DAA, forced to land at Cangamba early into the siege. (Albert Grandolini Collection)

expected, Commandant Mossie Basson found out that FALA were not besieging the town's inner defensive perimeter anymore, but had withdrawn. However, the interrogation of a FAPLA prisoner provided a very detailed description of the enemy entrenchments, and – noticeably – the strength of the main shelters and bunkers.

Accordingly, the SAAF decided to destroy the shelter for the HQ 32nd BrIL and a second major bunker with a mixed formation of Buccaneer and Canberra bombers drawn from Nos 3, 12 and 24 Squadrons. On 13 August, four aircraft of each type landed at Grootfontein AB in South West Africa. Meanwhile, FALA managed to gather several infantry formations near Cangamba, ready to launch a new large-scale assault. On 14 August at 0600 hs, insurgent mortars began to shell the garrison while two hours later, the South African aircraft appeared over the battlefield, approaching from the northeast – with the sun behind their back. The Buccaneers

went first and fired a pair of AS.30 guided missiles each, targeting the bunkers' entrances, before making a second pass to drop bombs. The Canberras followed and unloaded their bombs on the target area at low altitude. The South African flyers were completely unopposed as there was no AAA to protect the position, and the raid proved extremely devastating and completely shocked the garrison. Altogether, the eight aircraft had dropped or fired no less than eight AS.30 missiles and 60 1,000lb and 500lb bombs – and this within less than five minutes. Their moral shattered, and with FALA forces on the verge of launching their own assault, the remains of the 32nd BrIL withdrew toward Tempué. This time, FAPLA headquarters ordered not only an evacuation of survivors by helicopter, but also a withdrawal from Tempué. With this, UNITA could claim to have achieved a victory in what was its most important operation so far. Indeed the insurgents boasted to have killed 829 enemy troops, captured another 328, shot down five MiG-21s and four helicopters, captured 2,300 weapons while suffering 93 killed and 200 wounded in action during the whole battle – which was more than an accidental exaggeration.<sup>31</sup>

Still, it is arguable if either side 'won' at Cangamba. For UNITA, the expected demonstration of strength turned into a slogging match during which at least a third of its

semi-regular battalions were decimated – and made impossible any large-scale onslaught against Lucesse and Luena in the short term. The battle also demonstrated that the FALA's vaunted semi-regulars could not yet overwhelm smaller but determined forces if the latter benefited from air support. Things were no better for the other side: the 32nd BrIL was badly mauled and crucially, central Moxico province was lost, thus leaving UNITA a free hand to continue to expand the areas under its direct control.

By the last months of 1983, the dynamics of escalation were continuing to engulf Angola in bloodshed. Both FAPLA and FALA would continue to expand, getting stronger and stronger, while the Cubans and South Africans were increasingly drawn into the conflict despite their wish to limit their involvement. By the end of the year, the SADF collided again against FAPLA brigades in the Cunene province, in yet another attempt to keep PLAN guerrilla's

infiltrations into South West Africa under control. Nevertheless, the war was still far from having reached its climax.



UNITA insurgents walking down the tarmac of Cangamba's airport after they came back to secure the place. Visible in the background is the wreckage of the ill-fated An-26 serial T-202. (DIA via Tom Cooper)

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## NOTES

### Errata

- 1 Carlos E Pedre Pentón, pp.32, 35-36.

### Foreword

- 1 Wolfer and Bergerol, pp.111, 134-137, 145-147; Le Billon, pp.4-5, 13; Gleijeses, 2013, p.79.
- 2 Gleijeses, 2013, pp.80, 84, 86, 97.
- 3 Wolfer and Bergerol pp.112, 115, 153.
- 4 Ibid, p.151.

- 5 Ibid, pp.133, 139-154.
- 6 Georg pp.127-130; Wolfer and Bergerol pp.67, 85-88, 95.
- 7 Jason Zasky, 'The Twenty-Seventh of May 1977, Angola's forgotten massacre', *failurmag.com*, 14 October 2014
- 8 Gleijeses 2013, pp.114-115.

### Chapter 1

- 1 For details, see *War of Intervention in Angola, Volume 1*.
- 2 Instead of EPA, the more commonly used designation FAPLA is used throughout the text.



- 3 Wolfers and Bergerol pp.127-128.
- 4 Ferreira de Oliveira p.8; Junior 2015, p.45 & Raúl Castro, *Report on his Visit to Africa*, June 1976, wilsoncenter.org The latter quote is from Shubin & Tokarev, 2017, p.12 and p.15.
- 5 Shubin & Tokarev 2017, p.13.
- 6 Junior, 2015 p.91. Creation of the MRs was officially decreed in early 1983; MRs 7, 8, 9, and 10 came into being rather gradually, while the MR 6 was an 'upgrade' of the pre-existing 'South-East Military Zone'.
- 7 Nortje 2015, p.167. The one of 11th Infantry Brigade in 1981 included a single battery of S-60 57mm towed anti-aircraft guns, one battery of 23mm ZU-23 guns, and two teams equipped with 9K31 Strela 1 (ASCC-code 'SA-7 Grail') man-portable air defence systems (MANPADS).
- 8 Junior, 2015, pp.37-42, 58, 69, 87; Gárciga Blanco pp.143-144; Raúl Castro, "Report on his Visit to Africa"
- 9 Nortje, 2015, pp.160-162; BIL's nominal TOE's varied over time; noticeably, the size of brigade support units was increased and decreased on several occasions in attempts to find the best trade-off between maneuverability and staying power. At some point in time, the nominal strength of BrILs reached 1,712 men).
- 10 *Brigada de Destino Especial* – was a term from the Cuban military, and can be translated as a 'Special Intervention Brigade'.
- 11 Junior, 2015, pp.85-86, 90-92, 104; Tomashevich Menéndez & Gárciga Blanco, pp.18, 120; Gárciga Blanco pp.47-48.
- 12 Junior, 2015, pp.54, 99-100; Wolfers and Bergerol pp.121-122; Gárciga Blanco p.144.
- 13 Junior, 2015, p.41, 48, 68; Ferreira de Oliveira pp.8-9.
- 14 Junior, p.44.
- 15 Carmo Antonio (extracted 22 June 2018); Junior, 2015, pp.67, 103; Ferreira de Oliveira p.10.
- 16 A related study of this development is to follow in the next volume of this mini-series.
- 17 Junior, 2015, pp.44- 45, 106, 124; Sharpe, pp.8-9.
- 18 Sergei Kolomnin (extracted 22 June 2018).
- 19 Data provided by Martin Smisek (e-mail exchange, 25 and 26 October 2018), based on official records in the Archive of the Czech Republic.
- 20 According to Shubin (2008) and Kolmnin, by the end of 1994, 6,895 Angolans had followed courses in various military schools and institutes in the Soviet Union and then Russia. 3,358 of these were part of the army, 1,084 from the DAA, 1,310 of the FAPA and 591 of the MGPA.
- 21 Shubin, 2008, pp.57, 74 -75.
- 22 Raúl Castro, *Report on his Visit to Africa*, June, 1976, wilsoncenter.org, p.121; Ferreira de Oliveira pp.10, 14; Gárciga Blanco pp.47, 78.
- 23 Raúl Castro, *Report on his Visit to Africa*, June, 1976, wilsoncenter.org.
- 24 Junior, 2015, pp.56-57.
- 25 Ibid, p.88.
- 26 Shubin, 2008, pp.79-80.
- 27 Ibid, p.79.
- 28 'Minutes of the Meeting between Todor Zhivkov and Fidel Castro in Sofia', March 11, 1976. Among known FAR units present in Angola in May 1976 were the 1st DIM, 10th, 11th and 12th RIM and the RLCBM – the latter with 2,600 men. Two MININT Special Forces battalions were also present.
- 29 Raúl Castro, *Report on his Visit to Africa*, June, 1976, wilsoncenter.org; Gleijeses, 2013, pp.35-36, 43; Georg p.117.
- 30 The CIA assessed the number of Cuban troops in Angola in 1977 and 1978 as '15,000' (see CIA, *Cuban estimated Strength in Angola*, 24 October 1985, CIA Electronic Reading Room (henceforth CIA/FOIA/ERR). Another CIA estimate mentioned 18,500 men in Angola as of July 1977, but only 13,000 a few months later (*Activities of the Cuban Military in Angola from March 1976 to June 1977*, 27 July 1977, CIA/FOIA/ER), while Gleijeses (2013, p.43), mentions that 12,000 troops were withdrawn by March 1977.
- 31 Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, pp.12-14, 53, 60-62; Choy, Chui & Sío Wong p.93; Villegas p.21; and Raúl Castro, *Report on his Visit to Africa*, June, 1976, wilsoncenter.org. Notable is that the Cuban military terminology is confusing: same regiments are often designated by the name of the towns where their HQ was located.
- 32 For details, see *Africa@War* Volume 32: *Kolwezi*.
- 33 Gleijeses p.97; Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, p.150; Georg p.120; Campos Perales & Acosta Leyva p.44.
- 34 For most of 1976 at least, a second RIM was present in Cabinda in order to enter into Congo Brazzaville and reinforce the local army should that country be threatened with an invasion, while the first RIM was to remain in Cabinda to secure the enclave against a Zairian attack (see Raúl Castro, *Report on his Visit to Africa*, June, 1976, wilsoncenter.org). By May 1976, a small Guinea-Conakry battalion of 280 men had also arrived in country and garrisoned the town of Cuito Cuanavale.
- 35 Georg, pp.126, 130-131; Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco pp.5, 7-9, 12-14; Villegas pp.48-49.
- 36 South West Africa was the name for modern-day Namibia, while this was under South African administration, from 1915 until 1990. In 1966, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 2145 (XXI) which declared the Mandate as terminated and that the Republic of South Africa had no further right to administer South West Africa. In 1968, the UN General Assembly changed the territory's name by Resolution 2372 to 'Namibia': during the same year, the UN General Assembly recognized SWAPO as representative of the Namibian people and granted it UN observer status. In 1971 the International Court of Justice – acting on a request for an Advisory Opinion from the UN Security Council – ruled that the continued presence of South Africa in Namibia was illegal, and that South Africa was under an obligation to withdraw immediately. However, Pretoria ignored all of such requests until 1990.
- 37 swapoparty.org; Nujomah, pp.69, 125-131, 159-164; Livhuwani p.10; Scholtz pp.216-217.
- 38 Nujomah, pp.228-229.
- 39 Scholtz, pp.216-218.
- 40 Unless stated otherwise, this subchapter is based on Nujomah, pp.234-235 & 373; Mengovhela, pp.10-21, 28-36, 45-47; Nortje, 2012, Vol.I, pp.52, 130-136; the commemorative brochure *The USSR and SWAPO: Secret Mission in Angola, 1977-1990* (2014), and the following online articles: 'From the Frontlines to PhD...but for Dr Niikondo, Memories Still remain fresh', *Prime Focus Magazine*, August 2012; Fanuel Ktshenye, *How Moscow Battalion came into being*, www.swapoparty.org; Mwaka Liswaniso, *Richard Kapelwa Kabajani: A PLAN Fighter, Diplomat and Politician (1943-2007)*, www.newera.com.na; Ndaxu Namoloh, *Tribute to Peter Eneas Nanyemba Ndilimani Lyomukunda Wampuolo*, www.informante.web.na, 15 April 2010 & Confidence Musairi, *Whatever happened to the Military Council*; www.thevillager.com.na.
- 41 Tobias Hainyeko was the first PLAN commander killed in action, in 1968.
- 42 Scholtz, pp.194; Turner p.37.
- 43 Initially, SWAPO had a good relationship with UNITA and its guerrillas regularly crossed territories under Savimbi's control to reach Namibia – until 1975. That year, UNITA grew increasingly hostile to SWAPO – a prerequisite condition to gain South African support. By 1978, UNITA guerrillas were also ambushing PLAN supply convoys, and thus SWAPO had a common interest with Luanda in tackling UNITA (see Nortje, 2012, Vol.I, p.52 & Turner p.35).
- 44 PLAN tanks were never engaged in combat operations but they were a considerable source of prestige, despite suffering from chronic low-availability.
- 45 Another similar unit, the 20th Brigade, is also often mentioned.
- 46 Shubin, 2008, pp.78-79.

## Chapter 2

- 1 The two RIM HQs were garrisoned around the Cabinda and Lándana towns.
- 2 Raúl Castro, *Report on his Visit to Africa*, June 1976; Carreras Rolas p.217; Del Valle Céspedes pp.228, 232; Junior, 2015, p.40.
- 3 Del Valle Céspedes, pp.225-230.
- 4 Ibid, pp.230-239.
- 5 As mentioned in Volume 1, the Portuguese left dozens – probably over 100 – of diverse light civilian aircraft behind them on their withdrawal. Amongst these were such types as Beech B55 Barons, Britten-Norman BN-2s, and Cessna 310s. At least the first two types are known to have been pressed into service by the FAPA/DAA: precise details with regards to this issue are to follow in the next volume of this mini-series.
- 6 Trujillo Hernández, pp.71-72, 274; Del Valle Céspedes, pp.248-254; Raúl Castro, *Report on his Visit to Africa*, June 1976, wilsoncenter.org.
- 7 *Listado tentativo de pilotos caídos* on the blog *la ultima guerra* (extracted 2 July 2018).
- 8 Junior, 2015, p.40; Campos Perales & Acosta Leyva pp.32-35; Villegas p.47; Del Valle Céspedes p.256; Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco p.101.
- 9 For details, see *Africa@War* Volume 32: *Kolwezi*.
- 10 Similar engagements had been taken in 1976, but without consequences. Besides, Zaire continued thereafter to act as a logistical hub for UNITA, while some limited support continued to be provided to FLEC.
- 11 Gleijeses, 2013, pp.39, 41, 54-56; Kennes & Larmer pp.123-134; Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco p.121.
- 12 Gleijeses, 2013, p.539; North, 2012, Vol. I, pp.234-235.
- 13 Raúl Castro, *Report on his Visit to Africa*, June 1976, wilsoncenter.org.
- 14 Trujillo Hernández, pp.62-64, 272-273.

- 15 Bridgland, pp.203-214, Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, p.87, Gárciga Blanco p.170.
  - 16 UNITA claimed to have assembled 1,110 guerillas for the occasion. See Bridgland p.239.
  - 17 Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, p.87; Bridgland pp.227-228, 239, 243; Gárciga Blanco pp.13-14.
  - 18 CIA, *Activities of the Cuban Military in Angola from March 1976 to June 1977*, 27 July 1977, CIA/FOIA/ERR.
  - 19 Ecured, Sección de Lucha Contra Bandidos del Ejército del Centro entry, extracted 20 July 2018.
  - 20 Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, pp.18, 19.
  - 21 Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, pp.19-20, 24, 31-35, 49-51, 67; Bridgland pp.259, 268. Notably, the FAPLA claimed to have caused 4,000 casualties during 500 separate incidents and to have captured 21 weapons for every one lost to the enemy.
  - 22 Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, pp.66-69; Bridgland p.268.
  - 23 Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, pp.53-55, 66-87; Junior 2015, p.59.
  - 24 Bridgland, p.268, Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, p.120.
  - 25 Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, pp.118-119, 130-149, 153; Gárciga Blanco p.14.
  - 26 With 9 advisors per GT and 4 per battalion, plus supporting and security teams. Gárciga Blanco p.186.
  - 27 Bridgland p.278.
  - 28 Fidel Castro's 1977 *Southern Africa Tour; A report to Honecker*, 3 April 1977, wilsoncenter.org.
  - 29 Gleijeses, pp.103-110; Villegas, pp.53-54; Gárciga Blanco p.48.
  - 30 Quoted from *Memorandum of Conversation between Abelardo Colomé, Ulises Rosales and Konstantin Kurochkin*, 8 February 1984, wilsoncenter.org.
  - 31 Scholtz, pp.67, 69-71; Lord, 2008 pp.81, 84. According to SWAPO, 'Luanda and the Cubans', Cassinga was a transit camp for refugees, and for the South Africans, a crucial PLAN nerve centre. For further discussion about the 'Cassinga massacre' historiography, see Scholtz. 2013, pp.82-87.
  - 32 Scholtz, 2013, pp.79-80.
  - 33 Jiménez Gómez, p.240.
  - 34 Del Pino, 2013, pp.131-134; Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco p.100; Gleijeses, 2013, pp.60-61; Lord, 2008, p.85; Scholtz, 2013 pp.72-81; Shubin & Tokarev p.15.
  - 35 Gleijeses, 2013, pp.106-110, 213-214; Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco p.100; Gárciga Blanco p.48; Campos Perales p.44; *Memorandum of Conversation between Abelardo Colomé, Ulises Rosales and Konstantin Kurochkin*, February 08, 1984, wilsoncenter.org.
- ### Chapter 3
- 1 Several of Savimbi's opponents in the movement were executed after being accused of 'witchcraft.'
  - 2 For a more extensive description of UNITA's ideology and how the movement itself build its political base in central Angola between 1974 and 1976 see Péclard pp.320-328.
  - 3 Heywood pp.208-214 & Minter pp.222-224.
  - 4 For further details, and the role played by the protestant churches before and during independence, see Péclard Didier, *Savoir colonial, missions chrétiennes et nationalisme en Angola*, 2001.
  - 5 Notable is that even in the 1980s, Savimbi always defined UNITA's military developments through a Maoist lens (for examples see Loiseau & de Roux or Bridgland).
  - 6 Burke; Minter, pp.189, 217-219; Heywood p.212; Loiseaux & de Roux p.253; Gárciga Blanco; José Ángel p.150; Bridgland p.269.
  - 7 Notable is the blurry separation between civilian and military branches: all UNITA militants received at least some basic military training while a number of military cadres could be nominated to civilian positions, and the other way around. According to Savimbi, all FALA troops were also allegedly party members (see Loiseau & de Roux p.172).
  - 8 Nortje, 2012, Vol II, p.962.
  - 9 Minter pp.5, 32, 174, 177-181.
  - 10 Based on Burke.
  - 11 Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco p.167.
  - 12 MMCA's intelligence assessments were foremost in illustrating a dramatic growth of the FALA. Gárciga Blanco wrote (p.14) that as of 1977, the movement had between 7,000 and 9,000 combatants under arms. In 1978-1979 the MMCA increased the figure to between 9,000 and 11,000, with a similar number of men and women being available but not armed.
  - 13 Bridgland, pp.253, 268-269.
  - 14 Ibid, p.376.
  - 15 Nortje, 2012, p.236; Nortje 2015, pp.6-7; Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco p.167; Bridgland 248, 252-3, 258, 268-269, 285; Loiseau & de Roux pp.253, 255-257; Gárciga Blanco pp.14, 150; Minter pp.180-181.
  - 16 Gárciga Blanco, p.14. Notably, Cuban intelligence assessed that in July and August 1978 alone, the SADF delivered 2,372 rifles and 38 mortars to UNITA.
  - 17 Scholtz p.59; Nortje, 2015, pp.6-8; Gleijeses, 2013, p.67.
  - 18 Koh, H. H., *The National Security Constitution: Sharing Power After the Iran-Contra Affair* (Yale University Press, 1990), p.52; Fausold, M. L. & Shank, A., *The Constitution and the American Presidency* (SUNY Press, 1991), pp.186-187 & Albert Grandolini, interview, 24 July 2018.
  - 19 Albert Grandolini, interview, 24 July 2018; Bridgland pp.254-258, 271-273, 300, 310; Gleijeses, 2013, pp.67-68; Hooper, 1994; pp.41-43, Minter pp.151-152.
  - 20 This was reported by Jonas Savimbi personally to Fred Bridgland, and must be taken with a pinch of salt. It is indeed perfectly possible that by releasing such information to the international press, Savimbi intended to cover the SADF's support provided to FALA. Roughly at the same time, units such as 32nd Battalion were supporting FALA attacks by detaching their own – and extremely efficient – mortar teams. For the training provided by the African Safari, see Bridgland pp.257-258, 276, 286, 292, 295; Nortje 2015, p.16, and email exchange with Albert Grandolini. 24 July 2018.
  - 21 Cuban assessment for that year was 15,000, semi-regular forces included. See Gárciga Blanco p.15.
  - 22 It was during that Congress that Brigadier José Manuel Chiwale, the historical leader of FALA, fell out of favour and was replaced by Brigadier Demóstenes Chilingutula. Gárciga Blanco p.139, Bridgland p.360.
  - 23 Nortje 2015, pp.8, 11-16, 142; Junior pp.110-111; Bridgland pp.311, 312, 362-363; Gárciga Blanco p.138.
  - 24 The information presented here is based on cross-examination of Del Pino, Bridgland, Junior and Gárciga Blanco. Bridgland also mentioned the 9th Brigade, and Cuban intelligence the 13th Brigade, but these are left out because they were not mentioned by other sources.
  - 25 Burk; Minter pp.180-183.
  - 26 Ibid, pp.180-183; Bridgland pp.278, 324; Gárciga Blanco p.137.
  - 27 Burk; Bridgland pp.269, 278, 325, 363; Minter pp.184, 190; Lord, 2008, pp.457, 457.
- ### Chapter 4
- 1 Until 1983, when MR 6 was created to cover the Cuando Cubango Province, see Junior 2015, p.91.
  - 2 Junior, p.70.
  - 3 Bridgland p.293; Scholtz p.233; Nortje 2015, pp.3, 10-11, 13; Villegas p.54.
  - 4 Nortje 2015, pp.11-13; Nortje 2012, pp.415-417; Bridgland pp.279-280; Gárciga Blanco p.18.
  - 5 Nortje 2015 p.17; Nortje 2012 p.471.
  - 6 Bridgland p.293; Nortje 2015, pp.18-19; Gárciga Blanco p.18.
  - 7 Unless stated otherwise, the following account is primarily based on Nortje's book from 2015, dedicated to this battle. See pp.21-23, 40, 49, 66-69, 80-81, 84, 91, 98, 104-105, 121, 129, 137-138, 166-169.
  - 8 The assault on Rivungo took place either on 16 June or 14 July 1980 (see Bridgland pp.295-296, 300; Gárciga Blanco p.18; Nortje 2015, p.142).
  - 9 Nortje, 2015, p.142; Bridgland, p.300.
  - 10 Gárciga Blanco, pp.18-19; Nortje, 2015, p.142; Bridgland, p.331; Junior, 2015, p.80.
  - 11 Bridgland p.331-334; Gárciga Blanco pp.17, 19-20, 22; Gleijeses 2013, p.192.
  - 12 Scholtz, pp.121-124.
  - 13 Nortje, 2012, p.642.
  - 14 Lord 2008 p.167, Scholtz 2013 pp.126-127, Nortje 2012 pp.639, 641-642, Shubin & Ali 2014 pp.13-14, 17, Gleijeses 2013 p.189.
  - 15 Gleijeses, 2013, p.189.
  - 16 Gárciga Blanco p.49.
  - 17 These figures were provided by Scholtz, 2013, p.143. In comparison, Nortje (2012, p.663) cited much lower figures, including 438 killed in action and 46 PoWs.
  - 18 Scholtz, pp.127-143; Lord, pp.156, 172, 175, 177, 186; Nortje 2012 pp.654, 663-664. Detailed description of Operation *Protea* can be found in de Vries 2016, pp.260-319.
  - 19 CIA, *Estimated Strength of Cuban Military Contingent in Angola*, 24 October 1985, CIA/FOIA/ERR.
  - 20 Not all these reinforcements arrived directly from Cuba: some were re-assigned from the MMCA. For example, elements of the RIM Cubango were drawn from the former RIM North, which re-deployed from Negage to Dondo two years earlier. Similarly, RIM Caala was the former RIM Centro, previously based in Quibala, while RIM Mocamedes was formed by expanding a reinforced battalion already in



existence, see Gárciga Blanco, pp.45, 81, 107–108; Georg, p.142; Pedro Edy Campos Perales, p.42; Gleijeses, 2013, pp.213 & 215.

21 Gárciga Blanco, pp.4, 7–9, 29, 80, 85, 170–172.

22 Ibid, pp.50, 91–92 & Shubin 2008 p.79.

23 Villegas, p.53.

24 Ibid, pp.53–54, 63–65; Gárciga Blanco, pp.51, 71, 92, 98; Gleijeses, 2013, pp.190–191, 195, 228–229.

## Chapter 5

- 1 Bridgland pp.277, 298, 346–347, 353–355, 361. Notable is that, according to UNITA, ICRC was ‘collaborating and spying with the government’.
- 2 Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco, pp.28–29, Junior, 2015, pp.58–59; Bridgland p.275.
- 3 Bridgland, pp.243, 275–276; Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco pp.147–148.
- 4 Gárciga Blanco, p.144; Junior pp.84–85; Bridgland p.361.
- 5 Junior, pp.84–85.
- 6 Gárciga Blanco, pp.143.
- 7 Ibid, pp.72–74.
- 8 Ibid, pp.77–78, 157 & Villegas, pp.52–53.
- 9 Gárciga Blanco, pp.87–90.
- 10 UNITA made its plans clear enough during that congress by renaming its Northern Front as the ‘2nd Strategic Front’ (CO was Brigadier Chendobaba). In turn, the latter controlled the 25th, 35th, 50th, and 93rd Military Regions. The Central Front (CO Colonel Mario Canhala) controlled the 11th, 19th, 29th, 41st, 45th, and 98th Military Regions. Cross-referenced from Tomashevich & Gárciga Blanco p.169; Gárciga Blanco p.136 and Ramos Fajardo p.168.
- 11 Bridgland, p.361; Gárciga Blanco pp.97, 174; Junior, 2015, p.91.
- 12 Gárciga Blanco, pp.142–147.
- 13 Bridgland, pp.367, 383, 397; Gárciga Blanco pp.156, 174–175.
- 14 Ramos Fajardo, pp.21–24, 163–164; Nortje, 2012, pp.714–16. According to Nortje, the incident took place on 1 January 1982.
- 15 Ramos Fajardo, pp.167–171.
- 16 According to Bridgland (p.405), the whole operation was coordinated by FALA’s 9th Brigade Headquarters.
- 17 The loss of both the commander and the deputy commander of the ODP battalion at the beginning of the engagement obviously made matters worse, leaving behind a significant number of small arms and 200 boxes of ammunition. FALA reported to have suffered 17 KIA during the attack, while claiming to have killed 248 enemy soldiers, and captured another 37 while FAPLA acknowledged fifty casualties.
- 18 As so often before and after, UNITA claimed to have shot down the helicopter: actually, its Colonel Tembi Tembi, who was in charge of this operation, was demoted in rank to Lieutenant-Colonel as a punishment for the failure.
- 19 ‘From the frontlines to PhD... but for Dr Niikondo, memories still remain fresh’, *Prime Focus Magazine*, August 2012.
- 20 Gárciga Blanco, pp.174–1979; Bridgland, pp.405–406, 413; Ramos Fajardo, p.176.
- 21 Gárciga Blanco pp.148–151.
- 22 Ibid, pp.149–154; Georg, pp.152–154.

## Chapter 6

- 1 Gárciga Blanco pp.66–67, 77–78, 83–84, 114, 115, 131 & Bridgland pp.339, 357, 382.
- 2 Gárciga Blanco, pp.108–112.
- 3 Ibid, pp.108–112, 124–126; Bridgland, p.353; Perez Cabrera, p.388.
- 4 Gárciga Blanco, pp.113–119, 131–133, 162, 177.
- 5 Bridgland, p.366; Gárciga Blanco pp.116, 131–132, 162; Burke.
- 6 UNITA claimed that 16th BrI lost 187 KIA between 20 and 24 December 1982. The insurgents reported to have destroyed 17 trucks and a single BRDM-2, and shot down an ‘An-26’, while suffering 26 KIA and 87 WIA.
- 7 Gárciga Blanco pp.116, 131–133, 162, 177; Bridgland pp.357, 368, 382.
- 8 Bridgland pp.368–378; Gárciga Blanco p.162.
- 9 According to UNITA, mortar fire also destroyed one An-26 sitting in the airstrip Bridgland pp.400–401, 408, Gárciga Blanco pp.162–163.
- 10 Gárciga Blanco p.164.
- 11 Del Pino, 2013, p.181; Gárciga Blanco, pp.163–166, 168; Bridgland, p.405; Blandino, p.15.

## Chapter 7

- 1 Gárciga Blanco pp.166, 168, 176–177, Blandino p.49, Bridgland p.407, Del Pino Rafael, 2013 p.181, Junior 2015 p.91.
- 2 Del Pino, 2013, pp.181–183; MINFAR 9 December 1983; ‘Experiencias de las acciones combativas de Cangamba’ (Wilson Centre Digital Library, hereafter quoted as MINFAR 9.12.1983), Blandino pp.22, 25–29.

- 3 Sources vary about these: Blandino describes them as a ‘badly understrength battalion’, but they are also mentioned in Del Pino, 2013, p.185, as ‘drivers and mechanics part’ of 44th BrIN’s transport element.
- 4 While the insurgent mortar teams usually fired once a day, the garrison’s heavy weapons had to fire much more often, at least three or four times a day, either in order to counter-bombard FALA’s mortar teams, or in attempt to curb their deployments and re-deployments.
- 5 Fajardo p.84; Blandino pp.22, 25–29, 59, 244; Del Pino, 2013, pp.181–185, 242; MINFAR 9.12.1983.
- 6 MINFAR 9.12.1983; Blandino pp.22, 56–57; Lord 2008 p.290.
- 7 Sources differ with regards to the exact designation of the Brigade-HQ in question, reporting either the 12th or the 34th.
- 8 Blandino, pp.44, 47, 53–55, 114; Del Pino, 2013, pp.182–183; Wilsworth p.220; Lord, 2008, pp.289–290; *Memórias da nossa memória: Batalha de Cangamba – Lourenço António*, club-k.net, 2 August 2014.
- 9 Savimbi later acknowledged the involvement of 6,000 UNITA combatants in the battle – while all the time explaining the fictional version about a ‘clear cut victory won in a single and decisive assault.’ See Bridgland, p.410.
- 10 Del Pino 2013, p.181; Blandino pp.53, 64, 69, 99, 104, 113–115, 126, 138; Ramos Fajardo, pp.82–83; *Memórias da nossa memória: Batalha de Cangamba – Lourenço António*, club-k.net, 2 August 2014.
- 11 MINFAR 9.12.1983 & Blandino pp.142, 148.
- 12 Blandino pp.148–152, 175, 185, 204, 227–231, 234–235; Ramos Fajardo pp.104–107, 125, 136; MINFAR 9.12.1983.
- 13 Fajardo pp.71, 79–93; Blandino pp.172–176, 183.
- 14 Fajardo pp.95–100, 109–113, 122–125, 138; Blandino pp.207, 215; MINFAR 9.12.1983. The parent unit of the light infantry company in question remains unclear: it came either from one of 32nd BrIL’s units stationed outside Cangamba, or from the 54th BrIL.
- 15 Del Pino, 2013, p.188; Blandino pp.224, 245; Fajardo, pp.138–139 & MINFAR, 9.12.1983. Notable is that – whenever practicable – UNITA always carefully and systematically removed the bodies of its fallen so as to deny any kind of intelligence to its enemies. Therefore, its losses in Cangamba were certainly higher – even if there are significant discrepancies in reports about the number of weapons the insurgents left behind.
- 16 Unless cited otherwise, the following sub-chapter is based on Ramos Fajardo, pp.21, 45, 48–69; Blandino, pp.84–93, 103, 168, 192; Del Pino, 2013, pp.192–194, 199, 200; MINFAR 9.12.1983; da Glória Ramos & Ali, pp.101–102.
- 17 Blandino, pp.60–62, 67–69, 83; Del Pino 2013, pp.190–191. The *Olivo* mission’s fighter pilots had already flown several interdiction sorties in the area during July.
- 18 Blandino, p.182.
- 19 Unless cited otherwise, the following sub-chapter is based on Blandino, pp.107, 124, 136–137, 150, 158–162, 167, 182, 199; Lord, p.290; Del Pino, pp.222, 225, 433.
- 20 Known serials of Mi-8s that took part in the battle for Cangamba were H-02, H-08, H-31, H-32, H-47 and H-50.
- 21 Del Pino, 2013, p.433.
- 22 Blandino, p.158.
- 23 MINFAR 9.12.83 & Blandino pp.95, 120, 143.
- 24 Blandino, pp.94, 193, 207, 213, 215.
- 25 Ibid pp.64, 91, 113, 144, 160, 166–167, 184, 228; MINFAR 9.12.1983; Fajardo, pp.66–67.
- 26 Blandino, p.185.
- 27 Ibid, pp.197–199, 204–205, 209, 228 & MINFAR 9.12.83.
- 28 Blandino, pp.181, 209, 214–217, 228, 233, 258; Fajardo, p.66, 152; Del Pino, 2013, p.249.
- 29 Blandino, p.247.
- 30 Ibid, pp.236–237, 247, 253–259; Gleijeses, 2013, pp.222–223.
- 31 Lord 2008 pp.290–293; Bridgland p.410; Blandino, p.234.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adrien Fontanellaz, from Switzerland, is a military history researcher and author. He developed a passion for military history at an early age and has progressively narrowed his studies to modern-day conflicts. He is a member of the Scientific Committee of the Pully-based *Centre d'histoire et de prospective militaires* (Military History and Prospectives Centre), and regularly contributes for the *Revue Militaire Suisse* and *Défence et Sécurité Internationale* as well as various French military history magazines. This is his seventh title for Helion's '@War' series.





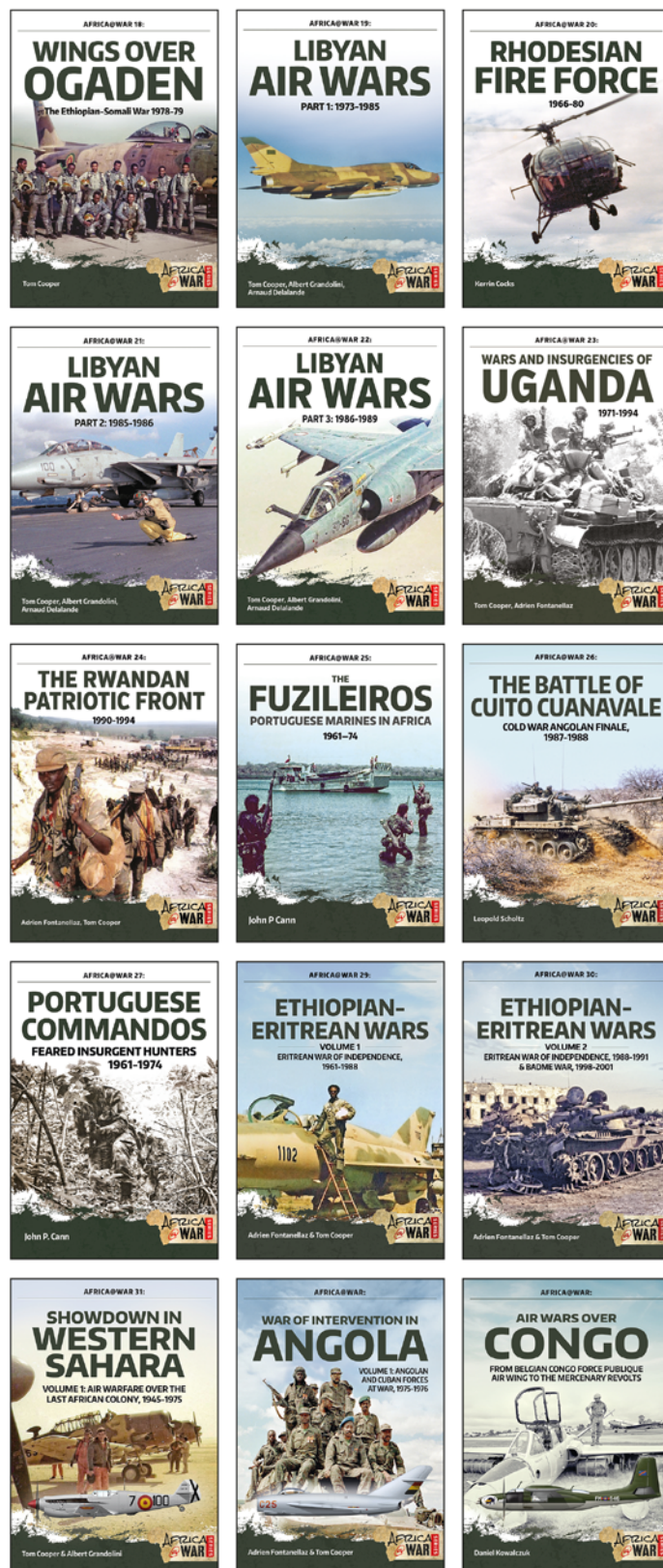
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Based on extensive research, and utilising Angolan and Cuban sources, *War of Intervention in Angola Volume 2* traces the military build-up of the Cuban and Soviet-supported Angolan military, the FAPLA and its combat operations, and those of the Cuban military in Angola in the period 1976-1983, their capabilities and intentions, and their battlefield performances. The volume is illustrated with over 100 rare photographs, half a dozen maps and 18 colour profiles.

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